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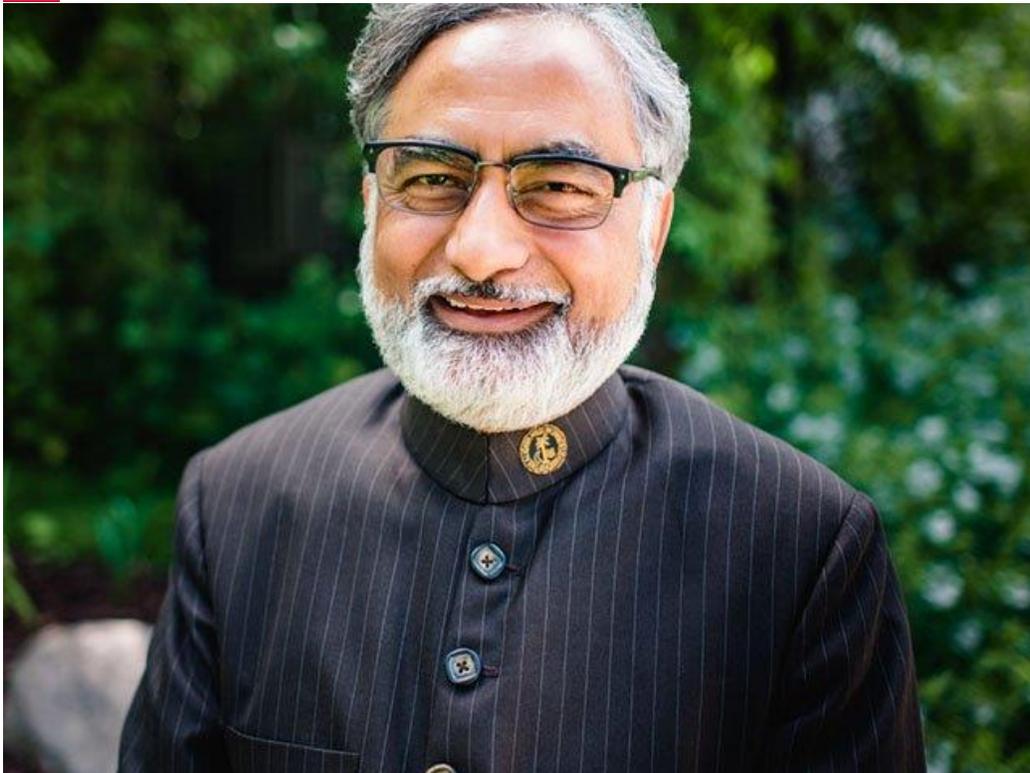
Man on a mission

Masood Akhtar is fighting hate, one person at a time

BY [VICTORIA DAVIS](#)

JUNE 13, 2019

[RSS](#)



The month of Ramadan has always been a “coming together” for Madison’s Muslim community.

Families spend May fasting, praying and worshipping together. With only three mosques in the Madison area, Muslim families here are tightly knit.

But in the wake of March’s New Zealand mosque shooting, this year’s Ramadan had a different mood — one of fear.

“Mosques have become a soft target for hate crimes,” says Masood Akhtar, a Madison Muslim and devoted anti-hate activist. “We never had to deal with this situation in the past. Even our families are having to decide which one of them will go to prayer.”

From 10 p.m. until midnight every day during Ramadan, Muslim communities gather at their neighborhood mosque to pray and worship. This is normally a family affair, with adults and children kneeling in prayer on the large emerald green rug at the Islamic Center of East Madison.

But this year people were “very nervous and scared” about going out as a group, Akhtar says. Many chose to send only one family member to the mosque.

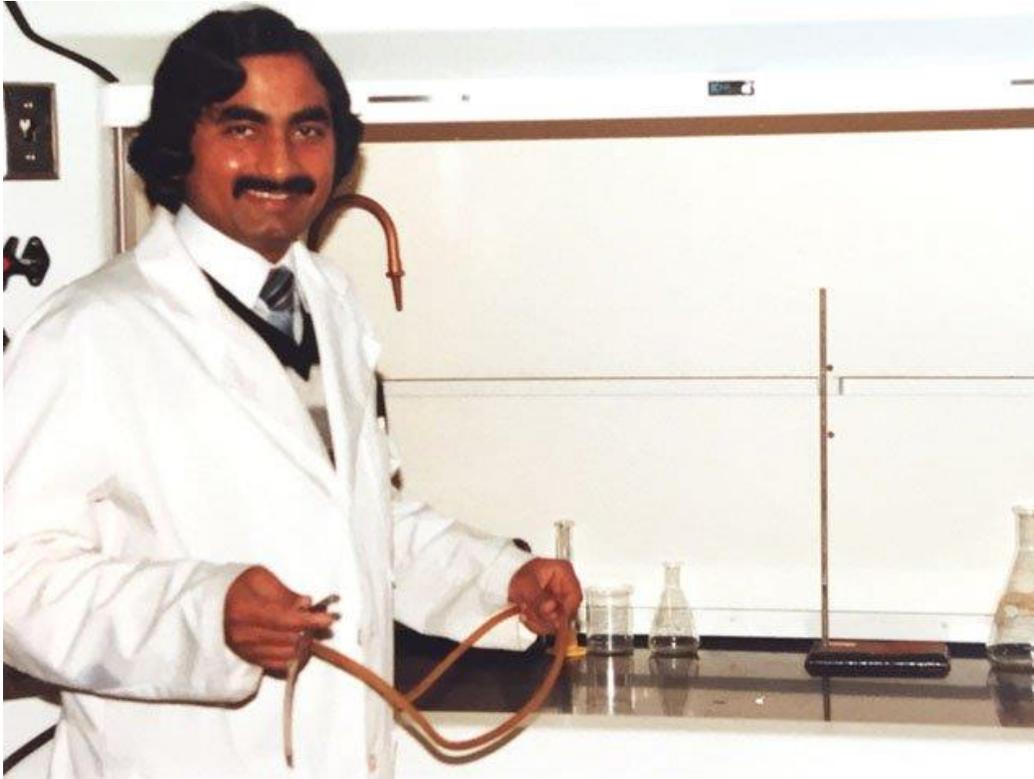
“We have to do what we have to do,” says Akhtar, who nevertheless attended evening prayers with his wife and two children. “It’s very unfortunate and sad that it’s come to this.”

Twenty years ago, Akhtar gave up his Indian citizenship to become an American. He never anticipated this sort of conflict when he first came here, but things have changed dramatically in the last two decades. Three years ago, he founded the group We Are Many United Against Hate to promote tolerance and preserve the country he idolized and fell in love with as a boy.

“This is the land of opportunity,” says Akhtar. “America is the best place for anyone to practice their religion and fulfill their dreams and that’s why I’m going to fight to make sure this country stays united.”

In 1984, Akhtar got his “lottery ticket” to the U.S. That year, the Indian government decided to send 50 people to foreign countries to complete their higher education. Akhtar’s chances of being one of them seemed slim — 60,000 people applied, and he was part of the minority Muslim population.

Akhtar had dreamed of coming to the U.S. since he was a boy, hearing his teachers describe “the greatness of America” with its religious freedoms and diverse cultures. So despite the odds, he traveled to the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research in Delhi, India, stood in a line of 200 people and waited to be interviewed by 15 experts from across the country.



Akhtar did postdoctoral work at The Ohio State University in the 1980s. Coming to the United States "was a 25-year dream in the making."

Two months later, he learned he won a scholarship. "It was a 25-year dream in the making," he says. Akhtar completed his postdoctorate in microbiology in two years in Columbus, Ohio. Then he received a call from his father.

"So what's the plan now?" he asked me," Akhtar remembers. "I told him I have three dreams: I want to give something back to India, I want to give something back to the United States, and I want to help every single person — regardless of their religion, color and ethnicity — change their lives through education, just like the way my life was changed."

Akhtar spent the next 20 years building partnerships between Indian and American energy companies, founding the Wisconsin-based CleanTech Partners Inc., and working hard to pay back every cent the Indian government had invested in his education.

In 2016, Akhtar, now a Madison resident for more than 30 years, began working on his third, most daunting and profound goal: fighting hatred and promoting tolerance. He was spurred to action by an ugly wind he saw blowing through his adopted country.

Shortly after Donald Trump was elected president in November 2016, his administration reiterated support for a "Muslim Registry."

Channel 27 news called Akhtar for a response. “My first gut reaction was, ‘This is not what America is about and it’s completely unconstitutional,’” Akhtar recalls. “People in our Muslim community were scared about what they were hearing. This was the first time we had really felt singled out. Then, I started seeing other minority communities feeling the same way.”

During his televised interview, Akhtar announced his plan. “I said to the interviewer, ‘I like the idea of starting a registry that will bring people together. So, today I announce, on your show, I am going to start a movement.’”

The movement was originally called “The Anti-Hate Registry.” In the following days, people emailed Akhtar roughly every five minutes asking to participate. They came from all backgrounds, religions and heritages. Eventually, the name was changed to We Are Many United Against Hate.

“This movement was never about ‘us’ versus ‘them,’” says Akhtar. “This is about bringing all people together regardless of white, black, brown and in between.”

The need for the group is apparent. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), the FBI reported more than 7,000 hate crimes in the U.S. during 2017, 58 percent of which were motivated by race or ethnicity and 22 percent motivated by religion.

In Wisconsin, there were 17 religion-based hate crimes in 2017, including the painting of [swastikas and “Trump Rules”](#) on a plaque outside the Gates of Heaven on Gorham Street in Madison. In April that same year, a [Muslim woman was attacked](#) in Milwaukee while walking home from prayer, which prompted other Muslim women to stop wearing their hijabs out of fear.

In a 2019 report, the [Institute for Social Policy and Understanding](#) argued that building coalitions with allies is one of the best ways to combat Islamophobia. “As 1 percent of the population, Muslim Americans cannot make positive change without building coalitions,” the report states.

United Against Hate is such a coalition. The group has 28 advisory board members, including Gloria Reyes, a Madison school board member and former Madison deputy mayor; Steve Porter, a civil rights lawyer; Elana Kahn, the director of Jewish Community Relations Council; Tim Cullen and Dale Schultz, both former state senators; Mike McCabe, an activist and former gubernatorial candidate; and A.J. Nino Amato, former UW-Madison regent and chair of the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups.

“We’ve got Republicans on the board, Democrats on the board and people from pretty much every kind of religious faith,” Amato says. “It really is incredibly inclusive.”

United Against Hate's mission is to seek equal treatment for all, regardless of religion, ethnicity, color or political affiliation, and unite against crimes of hate, bigotry and racism.

Dane County District Attorney Ismael R. Ozanne, former U.S. Attorney John Vaudreuil and Michael Light, an associate professor of sociology and Chicano/Latino studies at the UW, are a few people who have led talks. The group has also hosted speakers from the Jewish Museum Milwaukee to talk about the Holocaust.

Akhtar has participated in panel discussions about how terrorists are portrayed in the media, the definition of terrorism, experiences with Muslim groups and visiting Muslim countries.

“If a shooter is a Muslim, right away, you will see the phrase ‘Islamic terrorist,’ which automatically associates terrorism with a specific religion,” says Akhtar. “When a white shooter commits these crimes, you don’t see anything about his religion. Only that he’s mentally disturbed.”



Sam Szalkowski, left, and Levi Schlimgen, right, sit on the advisory board for United Against Hate. Akhtar: "These two could be the ambassadors to take this message to all high schools."

Sam Szalkowski and Levi Schlimgen were immediately drawn to United Against Hate's message after attending one of the group's events in [December 2017 at Monona Terrace](#).

At the talk, Arno Michaelis, a former white supremacist now combatting extremist hate, and Pardeep Singh Kaleka, a former police officer whose father was killed by a white supremacist at the Oak Creek Sikh gurdwara shooting, shared their stories.

Captivated, Szalkowski and Schlimgen asked United Against Hate to visit their high school in Mount Horeb.

“We have some problems in our school system and in our community with people not really understanding cultures that are different from their own,” says Schlimgen, who will be a senior next fall. “We wanted [United Against Hate] to come and talk to our students so people would get a better idea of how different things could be.”

“We’re both Caucasian men and straight. In terms of privilege, we’re probably at the top of the scale,” adds Szalkowski, who is also entering his senior year. “So personally, we don’t have a lot of experience with discrimination. But I have a brother-in-law who’s from Mexico and Levi’s brother is adopted from Kazakhstan. So we’ve had opportunities to see the problem and be emotionally pulled to find solutions.”

The assembly led to a partnership between Szalkowski, Schlimgen and Akhtar. “We were just sitting on the bleachers with 800 other kids and Masood was giving his introduction,” says Schlimgen. “At the end of it, he was like, ‘Oh by the way, we have two new youth advisory board members among us right now, sitting right there, Levi and Sam.’ And we just look at each other like, ‘What?’”

Much like his on-the-spot decision to create an anti-hate movement, Akhtar spontaneously came up with the movement’s core project — to create a K-12 task force, driven by students.

“I thought to myself, ‘You know, these two could be the ambassadors to take this message to all high schools,’” Akhtar says about Szalkowski and Schlimgen. “I never expected, with an organization as new as mine, that it would have such a powerful impact right away on these youth. So that was a moment for me that changed the way I thought about this movement. We didn’t change the vision, just the path.”

Now working with the state Department of Public Instruction, United Against Hate’s K-12 task force has three goals: study the root causes of hate, develop education programs to address them, and incorporate these programs into the K-12 curriculum. Szalkowski and Schlimgen both describe their short time on Akhtar’s advisory board as “life changing.”

“Meeting so many people from all these different backgrounds and getting to know them and their stories opened me up to a new world that I never knew existed,” Schlimgen says. “Most

people just look at themselves and they see their world, but they don't see anyone else. But once we were introduced to that advisory board, it's amazing how many people can come together and work towards a solution to such a devastating problem."

Nearly 70 percent of Wisconsin's elementary, middle and high school students are white or Caucasian, according to DPI. Schlingen and Szalkowski say that statistic shows why there's a need for education on diversity and hate speech.

"We're a safe district but we are still sheltered," Szalkowski says. "Especially with the use of slurs, even if they don't mean it in an offensive way to that group, it's still heavily influenced by peer pressure and the need to fit in."

Szalkowski says all too often he hears "chink," "nigger" and "kike" used in casual conversation among students.

"I've even heard them call people in their friend groups these things," Szalkowski says. "I don't think they even fully understand what they mean."

Michaelis, who has been giving talks at schools with Kaleka since 2013, says the seeds of hate are often planted at a young age when kids are afraid of being singled out.

"Younger minds are more vulnerable but also more open," Michaelis says. "That's the time to reach people. The younger we can get this message to them, the better.

"If you're talking to someone who's already very attached to an extremist ideology, it's going to take a really long time for these messages to sink in," he adds. "But if they're open and they're present and they're not wrapped up in some macro narrative with things around the world that they actually have no experience with, then those kinds of seeds are sometimes instantaneous."



FBI Director Christopher Wray, left, presents Akhtar with the Director's Community Leadership Award in May.

Last fall, Baraboo High School made international news after a photo started circulating on social media [showing about 60 students giving what appeared to be a Nazi salute](#) from the steps of the Sauk County Courthouse. It was taken the previous spring, before the school's junior prom, and circulated months later.

Akhtar helped Baraboo organize a series of tolerance events, including last winter's [Thunderbird Day of Peace](#).

“We found ourselves touched by [Masood’s] sincere desire to assist in our healing process and empowering students to take action,” says Lori M. Mueller, district administrator for Baraboo. “In a time of great need, Masood showed up and solicited others to come to Baraboo to remind us to be kind, forgiving and grateful with ourselves and each other in this world.”

Akhtar also assisted with McFarland High School’s Spartan Peace Project, a campaign to promote empathy, encourage courageous conversations and call students to action. While McFarland already had a diversity class, taught by Angela Bazan, school librarian Sheila Fay says Akhtar hosted a series of United Against Hate panel discussions and provided mentorship to teachers and students on how to promote peace.

“When Masood got on board, he empowered us to take this to the next step rather than just having the occasional assembly event,” Fay says. “He met with us to brainstorm ways we could empower our students to take initiatives of kindness in the same way.”

Bazan adds: “We’re not a very diverse school, but I think it’s important our students feel empowered to understand these differences especially as we get more diversity in our schools. Showing empathy at this age is huge because a lot of teenagers are pretty self-obsessed, and Masood has really headed this idea of courageous conversations.”

The Spartan Peace Project is now a district-wide initiative, and has prompted student-led food drives, basket drives and Kindness Month in February, when people are challenged to do community-wide acts of kindness.

The Peace Project also helps train students to become leaders in the movement for peace and many of McFarland’s student “Peace Projectors” attended the Kindness Summit at the Waubesa Intermediate School, where high schoolers volunteer to spend the day with third through fifth graders.

“Social and emotional learning is not an extra anymore,” says McFarland High School’s associate principal Anne Nichols. “That has to be the foundation of all learning. And if we don’t address that then we’re just going to be perpetuating more divisiveness.”

One of the things Nichols admires about Akhtar’s movement is the push to reach not only older teens, but younger children who are just as vulnerable, if not more, to hate.

“The older they get, the more that’s at stake as friend groups are already being formed and expectations of who they think they should be are already there,” says Nichols.

It’s a fear Schlimgen has for his younger brother from Kazakhstan, who is about to enter middle school.

“One day I was upstairs in the kitchen with my mom and heard my brother’s friends using the N-word,” he says. “It was unnerving. I don’t want my little brother to grow up around the wrong people, thinking the wrong things.”



ALTHEA DOTZOUR

Andrew Dotzour, 12, interviews Akhtar after a United Against Hate conference in 2017.

Last month, United Against Hate hosted a new youth-driven event at Mount Horeb High School. Glazed, baked, pickled and seasoned dishes — Swedish meatballs, apfelstrudel, spaetzle, smoked salmon — from more than a dozen Mount Horeb families filled every corner of a long table along the school’s atrium. Forty students, educators and community members brought the food of their heritage for a community “Fællesspisning,” or Danish potluck.

Draped over the top of each table was a large white paper with the phrase, “Write Your Story,” at the top.

Messages scrolled on the paper included “First generation American, mom from Germany (born during World War II),” and “I was born in Kazakhstan. I became a U.S. citizen when I was 11 months old.”

Akhtar, wearing a wide grin, attended with Kaleka and Michaelis. Kids and parents flocked to the three of them, and the activists greeted everyone like family.

Szalkowski says that Akhtar's warmth comes through in every situation. "Masood is willing to tackle any and every corner of the possibility of equality, and makes efforts to make sure everyone feels safe and accepted," Szalkowski says. "He loves America and he wants this to be a place where everyone can be successful. He's a great person to have leading the front lines for that."

Working with Szalkowski and Schlingen, Akhtar is creating a High School Students Advisory Board that will include two students from each high school across the state. The idea is to create a network connecting the students, who will work with community leaders, teachers, administrators and parents to help implement peace initiatives and curriculum. Akhtar hopes to eventually extend this model to college campuses.

Kaleka says that Akhtar's generosity has a multiplier effect. "United Against Hate isn't just spending time with these kids in assemblies, talking about all the things going wrong with this world," he says. "They're building them up to change things."

It's only been three years since Akhtar announced his plan to start an anti-hate movement. His efforts haven't gone unnoticed. In February, Gov. Tony Evers awarded him a Certificate of Achievement, and in May, FBI Director Christopher Wray awarded him a Director's Community Leadership Award.

But Akhtar knows there's still lots of work yet to do, a lot of hate still percolating, a lot of children yet to educate. He hopes to eventually make United Against Hate a national group, possibly even global. "If you want to change the community and change the way people think about one another, it's more than a full-time job," says Akhtar. "There's still a problem at all of these schools that you don't see in the newspapers."

But he doesn't dwell on the negative.

"Forgiveness is the greatest gift in Islam," Akhtar says. "The teamwork is here, and people are watching what we are doing."

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