

## Muslims try to find a common ground

### There are more than 70,000 Muslims in both Nassau and Suffolk counties

BY MARTIN C. EVANS  
STAFF WRITER

July 31, 2005

When Dr. Aziz Chaudry arrived from Kenya in 1972 to do his residency at Bay Shore's Southside Hospital, there was not a single mosque on Long Island where he could practice his Islamic faith.

He made do anyhow, praying at home, finding space alone at work or joining fellow Muslims wherever he could find them.

But then the doctor's father visited from abroad and brought with him a fateful question.

"He said, 'Where are we going to say the Friday prayers?'" Chaudry said, alluding to the Islamic mandate requiring Muslim men to attend a mosque on Fridays whenever possible.

So began the Islamic Association of Long Island, a mosque housed in a low building just off Middle Country Road in Selden, in the heart of Suffolk County.

The oldest chartered mosque on Long Island, founded in 1974, it is an oasis of religious life for hundreds of Muslims living on eastern Long Island.

"There was a desire to maintain one's identity as Muslims in the melting pot," Chaudry said, explaining why he got involved in founding the mosque. "We wanted to be able to impart to our children the values we grew up with."

On Friday afternoons, Chaudry is in the mosque, packed tightly among scores of others, who make their way to the mosque's carpeted floors. There, led by the Arabic intonations of an imam from Pakistan, they kneel and prostrate themselves in accordance to Islamic teachings.

It is a weekly ritual that joins Long Island natives with immigrants from Muslim lands scattered across the globe: from the Horn of Africa to the steppes of Central Asia, from the mountains of



India and Pakistan to the Mediterranean's shoreline. It is a ritual repeated in mosques from Valley Stream to Moriches, in tiny spaces crammed into converted colonial-style houses and in grand edifices built with flourishes reflecting the architecture of the Middle East.

### **Exceeding capacity**

More than 70,000 Muslims live on Long Island, according to an estimate by the Islamic Center of Long Island, in Westbury. Spurred by a migration east from neighborhoods in New York City, the ranks of Long Island's Muslims are growing so quickly that long-established mosques like Selden's have exceeded their capacity.

The main sanctuary in Selden has become so crowded that on a scorching Friday last month, dozens of worshipers knelt on prayer rugs laid in the sun in a concrete courtyard behind the sanctuary.

The Islamic Center of Melville, formed three years ago after mosques in Westbury and Selden reached overflowing, is already crowded beyond capacity. Leaders of the mosque, which is on a service road of the Long Island Expressway, have purchased a house and lot next door for a planned expansion.

At least two more mosques are on the drawing board: one in Ronkonkoma and another in western Nassau.

### **Settling on Long Island**

U.S. census data shows that immigrants from countries with large Muslim majorities have settled in Nassau and Suffolk in significant numbers. Long Island is home to 1,100 Bangladeshi immigrants, 1,225 Afghans, 6,700 Pakistanis, 650 Iraqis, 4,100 Turks, 2,500 Egyptians and 290 Syrians, according to the 2000 census. Another 20,000 Long Island immigrants came from India, where Muslims are 13 percent of the population.

One of the worshipers at Selden is Abdullah Astea. A former player with the Moroccan national soccer team, Astea, 55, now cheers for his son, James, who dominates lacrosse face-offs for Stony Brook University.

"Certainly with the change with the immigration laws in 1965, there has been a tremendous influx of Muslim immigrants from North Africa, Asia, the Middle East and even the Caribbean," said Louis Cristillo, project coordinator of the Muslims in New York City Project at Columbia University.

Although growth from immigration is slowing, much of the increase of practicing Muslims on Long Island is attributed to the children of immigrants. Often, interviews show, these Muslims are more fervent in their beliefs than their parents, finding a comforting sense of belonging in a country in which they are often seen as outsiders.

### **Devout Muslim**

Atif Sarooqi, 17, of Floral Park, said although his parents were not particularly observant Muslims when he was younger, he became a devout follower after he and his sister began receiving instruction. Today, he is a regular attendee of the Hillside Islamic Center, a new mosque that meets in New Hyde Park in a hall rented from the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks.

"Everything we do pretty much revolves around Islam, and that's very different from the way it is with the rest of society -- things about sex, about drugs and alcohol, pretty much everything," said Sarooqi, a 2005 graduate of Archbishop Molloy, a Catholic high school in Briarwood, Queens.

The son of Pakistani immigrants, Sarooqi considers himself more devout than most of his parents' friends, who he says became too secularized as they sought to gain a foothold in American life.

"We started learning the real rules and started asking, 'What else are we doing wrong?'" Sarooqi said of his religious instruction. "It becomes a big political argument with our parents."

"I consider myself more Muslim than I do Pakistani or American," Sarooqi said.

Chaudry said the Selden mosque serves as an oasis for area Muslims, allowing them to quench a thirst for elements of Islamic life that are mostly missing in everyday Long Island.

A bulletin board in the mosque's main hallway, overlooking a rack where worshipers leave their shoes before praying, is pasted with messages offering services many area Muslims find hard to obtain.

One advertised a funeral home that helps arrange the ritual washing and quick burial Muslims require to honor their dead. Another offered tutoring in the Quran for children. Still another offered to arrange pilgrimages to Mecca -- the birthplace of Islam -- in Saudi Arabia.

Several nearby shops cater to the needs of the mosque's members, including Lucky Kabab & Grill, a halal restaurant opened by one of the congregants.

"When I came, there were no halal meat shops, so it was a struggle," Chaudry said of his early years. "It came down to, how badly did you want to eat?"

### **Worshippers' difficulties**

Life on Long Island presents a myriad of challenges to Muslims seeking to practice their faith. Only a handful of stores offer halal foods -- meats and other products prepared according to Islamic religious law. With a handful of mosques scattered along the 90 miles from Elmont to Montauk, many Muslims live too far away to worship or socialize with fellow Muslims.

Many area worshipers find it difficult to juggle Islam's five-times-a-day prayer schedule with jobs, school, commutes and other demands of life. At set times near dawn, midmorning, midday, late afternoon and in the evening, practicing Muslims are expected to face Mecca and prostrate themselves in prayer.

And many Muslims feel estranged by America's embrace of suggestive television programming, pop lyrics and revealing clothing. Many Muslim parents refuse to allow their teenage children to date, saying it is best to keep them from temptation.

"My parents treat me like a girl," said Sarooqi, who says his parents still restrict his social life, even though he will begin attending college in a few weeks.

But Afroz Kazi, president of the Selden mosque, said American traditions of religious pluralism have made it easier for Muslims to construct individualized religious lifestyles here than it was in

their native countries.

In Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt and several other Muslim nations, he said, fatwas, religious opinions issued by Islamic clerics pertained to the smallest details of daily life, including what women could wear, how men should pray or even the rules under which someone could borrow money to purchase a home.

"Really, there is more Islam practiced here than where we came from," said Kazi, who was born in Pakistan and is raising a family in Farmingville. "There is freedom of religion here, freedom of speech. We see more benefits than impediments."

Copyright 2005 Newsday Inc.