

Divided We Fall

The stories of hate-crime victims in America form the core of a documentary — and provide powerful testimony to our need for greater understanding of cultural and religious differences.



By Tracy Wells

An incredibly deafening sound pierces the crisp blue air of a beautiful September morning in New York. On the streets of lower Manhattan, a young Brooklyn-born financial consultant looks up to see a plane soaring just above the skyscrapers he's standing under. His eyes follow it into Tower 2 of the World Trade Center; the first tower is already smoldering. He immediately ducks under some scaffolding to avoid the debris that explodes into the air, showering the streets with burning papers and other office materials.

Amrik Singh Chawla, 33, had been headed downtown on business on the morning of September 11, 2001, when he learned that the World Trade Center was on fire. He was leaving the island on foot when he saw the second plane hit.

After climbing out from under the scaffolding and helping a woman out from under some debris, he began his panicked journey off the island.

Suddenly, as he rounded a corner on Broadway, two men approached him. One pointed at him and yelled, "Hey, you ****ing terrorist, take that turban off!" They chased him into a subway station, where Amrik jumped on a train, narrowly escaping their angry threats.

Amrik is a follower of Sikhism, a religion from northern India that originated in the 15th century CE and has more than 20 million followers worldwide. Amrik keeps his long uncut hair wrapped in a turban as a religious article of faith.

Osama bin Laden also wears a turban.

But this incident occurred just minutes after the second plane hit; these men hadn't yet seen images of bin Laden on the news. And even though bin Laden claims to represent a form of Islam, not Sikhism, and his turban is significantly different in style from Sikh turbans, the average American has no knowledge of these nuances. The visceral, knee-jerk reaction is strong: "Turban equals terrorist."



Executive producer Valarie Kaur interviews Kevin Harrington, an American Sikh. Opposite, middle: Valarie and the author take five.



Director Sharat Raju watches cinematographer Matthew Blute film an interview. Opposite: Valarie Kaur and Amrik Singh Chawla meet at Ground Zero, four years after his narrow escape. All photos courtesy Tracy Wells.

Amrik is just one of many Sikh Americans who were threatened or were victims of hate crimes in the minutes, weeks, months and years following 9/11. They were targeted because of their appearance — turbans and beards, both articles of Sikh religious faith.

His story and many others are told in the forthcoming documentary film *Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath*, from New Moon Productions. I have been volunteer communications director for this project since last May.

Amrik was one of the lucky ones — he survived his brush with hatred. Others were not so lucky. Although the numbers are not definite, an estimated 19 people have been killed in 9/11-related hate crimes.

One of these was Balbir Singh Sodhi, a turbaned Sikh man who was murdered at his gas station in Mesa, Ariz., on September 15, 2001. His story is one of the central features of *Divided We Fall*. When arrested, his attacker, Frank Roque, yelled, “I am a patriot! Arrest me and let those terrorists go wild!”

A reason to act

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I didn’t know the slightest thing about Sikhism. The thought that this disaster might spur “retaliatory” hate crimes against innocent Americans never crossed my mind as I watched the planes careen into the World Trade Center from the safety of my apartment in North Village, while I was getting ready for the first day of classes of my junior year at Furman. I had no idea who Amrik was, or what a Sikh was.

And yet, nearly four years later, I would be standing at Ground Zero with the crew of *Divided We Fall*, hearing Amrik describe these events and how his life has changed since 9/11.

Divided We Fall had its humble beginnings in 2001, as a student research project. That fall Valarie

Kaur, supported by a Stanford University student research grant, filmed more than 100 hours of raw video footage of interviews with hate-crime victims in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Valarie, like me a junior in college on 9/11, is a Californian and a third-generation Sikh American. Her paternal grandfather immigrated to California from India in 1913. After 9/11 she began hearing (and reading on Sikh e-mail lists) countless stories of Sikhs targeted for everything from verbal harassment to murder — as in the case of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a man Valarie’s family friends knew personally.

At first Valarie was paralyzed by fear. Then she remembered a central passage of Sikh scripture that her grandfather had stressed to her: “*Naam Daan Isnan*,” which she translates, “In order to connect with God and realize yourself, you must act.”

She knew she had to do something. She hopped into the car with her turbaned 18-year-old cousin, Sonny, and set off across the country to document these stories. She wanted to ensure that they would not be lost, as were many stories of the victims of the anti-Sikh rioting in India in 1984. Her maternal grandfather had survived those riots, which prompted many Sikhs — including Balbir Singh Sodhi and his family — to immigrate to the United States.

Over the past four years, Valarie, the film’s executive producer, has picked up a professional film crew, led by award-winning director Sharat Raju, and begun graduate work (on religion and violence) at Harvard Divinity School, where she is a classmate of mine. In the summer of 2005 she retraced her original steps across the country, visiting the 2001 interviewees and updating their stories. Her crew filmed for more than a month on the West Coast and in Arizona, revisiting the family of Balbir Singh Sodhi,

Their turbans and beards, both articles of Sikh religious faith, made them targets.

and then spent two and a half weeks on the East Coast, traveling to New York and Washington, D.C.

I was working for the summer in Boston, but I was fortunate enough to be able to take time off and join the crew while they were in New York and D.C.

Hostility toward the turban

We met Amrik at Ground Zero on a hot August afternoon to update his story. He was doing well. He had gotten married and moved to New Jersey, and business was good.

However, he still spoke of subtle prejudices, of feeling strangers’ eyes on him, and of the importance of reaching out to the wider community to educate people about Sikhs.

We also met new people whose stories of prejudice and hate had surfaced. Rajinder Singh Khalsa was beaten unconscious outside his brother’s Indian restaurant in the Richmond Hill neighborhood of Queens in July 2004. His attackers yelled at him, “Give me that dirty curtain” (referring to his turban). They told him, “Go back to your country.”

We met Khalsa at his brother’s restaurant, where the staff welcomed us with a wonderful meal after we filmed outside the store. We later continued filming in Khalsa’s backyard.

His wife and daughter showered us with hospitality, including hot tea and Indian snacks.

I was amazed at the determination and resilience of this man, who had been a human rights activist in India. As the film crew set up the camera and tried to find decent light levels in the setting sun, Khalsa’s daughter showed me photos of her father receiving honors and awards for his humanitarian work.

He had been an outspoken critic of the Indian government’s complicity in the 1984 violence against Sikhs in northern India. As a result of his activism against injustices done to Sikhs, who are also

minorities in India, he was tortured by the Indian police. He immigrated to the States to escape further persecution. This made the 2004 attack on him all the more ironic.

This fall, two of Khalsa’s attackers were convicted under New York’s hate-crime law, while three others were acquitted of hate-crime charges but convicted of second-degree assault and harassment.

Hostility toward the turban has taken less violent forms after 9/11 as well. We interviewed Amrik Singh Rathour, a police officer who won a lawsuit against the New York Police Department after being fired for refusing to remove his turban on the job.

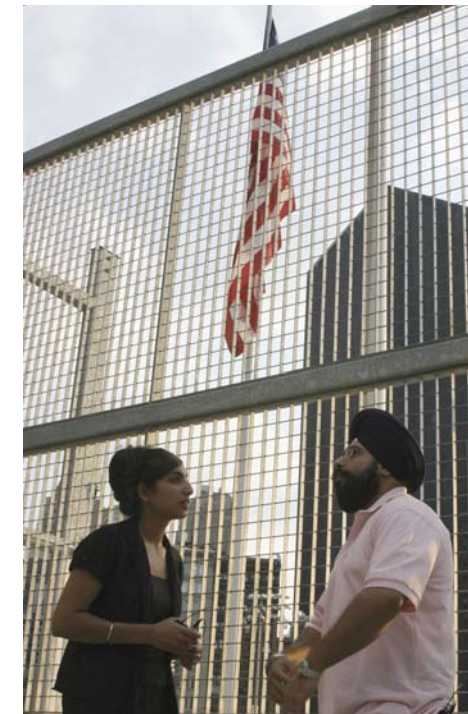
“I had always felt that this was my home,” said Rathour, who was born and raised in New York. “This is the greatest city in the world. But after getting fired, the discrimination really disturbed me. I took it to heart. You think that you’re not human. It may seem like nothing to someone who doesn’t understand believing in something, but when you’re judged like this, it really hurts.”

Also in Queens, we spoke with Kevin Harrington, a white American convert to Sikhism. He has worked for the MTA, the New York mass transit system,

for more than 20 years. He drives the No. 4 subway line in the city and has always worn his turban.

In June 2003, the MTA told him he must remove his turban or else work in an area where the public couldn’t see him (and accept a demotion). Kevin currently has a case pending against the MTA; five other Sikh subway station agents have filed complaints over the same policy.

These kinds of stories, told by the people who experienced them, are the heart of *Divided We Fall*. But the crew also wanted to examine the context of these attacks and discriminatory policies.



About Sikhism

Sikhism is a religion that originated in northern India in the 15th century amid Muslim-Hindu conflict and violence. Speaking against religiously fueled hatred, Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, stressed the equality of all people as human beings, regardless of their religion. Nanak rejected the caste system of much of India and supported the equality of men and women. All Sikhs are expected to perform *seva*, or selfless service to others.

Sikhs do not cut their hair for religious reasons. Orthodox Sikhs have untrimmed beards and wear their long hair wrapped in turbans on their heads.



Although turbans are cultural in some parts of the world, Sikhs wear them as a religious practice. Taking them off is akin to undressing.

— Tracy Wells

The view from all sides

It is easy to dismiss hate crimes as the actions of a few “crazy” individuals. And most people would agree that such violence is inexcusable.

But are these merely isolated events, or are they part of a wider societal problem? Where did those “crazy” individuals get the idea that a man with a turban and beard must be a terrorist? Why would they feel justified in attacking such an individual — and even feeling that such an action was patriotic, as Sodhi’s killer claimed? Why are people like Rathour and Harrington expected to give up a central part of their religious identity to keep a job, in a country that prides itself on protecting religious freedoms?

We sought answers to these questions through “analysis” interviews with a diverse group of scholars, legal experts, politicians and civil rights activists. In New York we talked to Joshua Freidman, professor at Columbia University School of Journalism, about the media’s role in perpetuating (or countering) stereotypes. We traveled to Yale Law School in New Haven, Conn., and interviewed Dean Harold Koh and professor Kenji Yoshino about the legal and sociological aspects of discrimination on an institutional level. They spoke of how government policies after 9/11 (particularly those that target immigrants) and law enforcement’s tendencies toward racial profiling have created a national atmosphere conducive to the type of violence “on the ground” that so many of our interviewees have experienced.

And, because we wanted to start an authentic dialogue about these issues, we sought out individuals who are not so critical of racial profiling or the Patriot Act, or who might argue that hate crimes are isolated events and not indicative of wider societal problems.

In New York we interviewed City Councilman James Oddo, who had spoken publicly earlier in the

summer of his support for a bill that would remove restrictions against racial profiling in subway security searches. The media had painted him as a heartless tyrant, but in reality we found a kind man who had done much soul-searching about the best way to protect his hometown from the kind of loss he had seen on 9/11. He worried that the fear of being accused of racial profiling might prevent police from doing their jobs, and that officers might be reluctant to stop someone who seemed suspicious if they had just stopped three people of the same race.

In D.C., we spoke with Clifford May, president of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. He vehemently condemned hate crimes but argued that government and intelligence agencies cannot ignore that the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were all young male immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries. He has written in support of the Patriot Act and argues that the government may need to focus on specific “types” of individuals in its counter-terrorism strategies, but also that the government’s policies do not (and should not) influence average citizens to direct hate or blame for terrorism against other citizens based solely on their appearance.

In looking at these issues from different perspectives, I am constantly struck by the isolated, parallel worlds that exist within our country. The memory and influence of 9/11 have made all Americans wary and fearful of additional terrorist attacks. But, if you talk to a Sikh or Muslim, the mention of 9/11 conjures up an additional fear — of being attacked, beaten or killed on the streets because of their appearance. If you talk to many non-Sikh or non-Muslim people, the mention of 9/11 most likely conjures up fear of people who look like many Sikhs and Muslims!

And none of these groups seem to have much awareness of the perspectives of the others.

For me, being a Christian means speaking up for those who don’t have a voice.

That this film crew is dedicated to representing a wide range of opinions is one of the things I most respect about them. In a time when our country is so divided, dialogue between people with differing perspectives, people who may not normally interact with one another, is desperately needed.

The Furman influence

We have no way of knowing how our lives will intersect with others’, but I deeply believe that we are constantly being prepared for and led to certain people, places and encounters. I look back on my years at Furman and see the ways in which I was being prepared for my work with this film.

My studies at Furman sparked a fascination in me for the world’s religions. I was so intrigued that I went straight from Furman to a Master of Theological Studies program at Harvard Divinity School in the fall of 2003.

In Cambridge I landed a job with Harvard’s Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org), an organization that researches religious diversity in the United States. I had connections because I had done research on my hometown of Columbia, S.C., through Furman’s affiliate chapter of the Pluralism Project, which religion professors Claude Stulting and Sam Britt direct. I met Valarie in November 2003 at a Pluralism Project conference in Atlanta, where she was presenting a rough cut of her 2001 footage.

While at Furman, I realized the importance of interfaith dialogue through a fall 2001 course on Islam — and through conversations about faith with a fellow student who happened to be Muslim. Subsequently, I founded a student organization for dialogue between students of different religions called “Interfaith@Furman.”

Since those days I have been a strong advocate of dialogue, especially dialogue across real disagreements and differences. It is too easy to demonize and caricature the “other” — whether that be someone who is of a different religion, political perspective or race — if one never interacts with the “other” but instead remains in an isolated, segregated, homogenous world. This concern for dialogue impacts and informs my work with *Divided We Fall*.

Furman inspired in me a deep desire to make a difference in the world, cliché as it may sound. At Furman I was encouraged to *engage* with society, to apply my skills to the wider world.

In May 2003 I sat in Paladin Stadium and listened as President David Shi granted us our degrees,

“with all [their] privileges and responsibilities.”

That call to the *responsibility* side of privilege made a deep impression on me. If my opportunities, my experiences and my education benefit me alone, I believe I will have failed miserably.

For me, work on this film has a deeply spiritual quality. The sense of responsibility to society and to my fellow human beings is deeply religious for me. It is a mandate, a calling that I draw from the many passages in the Gospels where Jesus speaks to the responsibilities of the privileged and to what theologians like to call his “preferential option for the poor.” For me, being a Christian means speaking up for those who don’t have a voice — or whose voices have been lost, unheard or unacknowledged.

When Valarie asked me to join the *Divided We Fall* crew, I felt at first that it would be pretentious of me to become part of a project that was “not my story.” What do I know about prejudice? What do I know about fear? I don’t have to worry about someone attacking me because of my appearance. It somehow felt inauthentic for me to presume to understand or to speak for these people’s experiences.

But Valarie put things in perspective: “Tracy, this is a real role, a necessary role,” she wrote in response to a panicked e-mail from me, filled with self-doubt. “And you have the skills it needs. You did not choose this project. But neither did I ‘choose’ you for the project. You came before me. Your skills were clear. And the project chose you. Before I even knew it. Strange how these things work?”

Yes, it is strange. Since then, Valarie and I have had many conversations about our shared feeling that this film is driven by a force much larger than ourselves — a force in which I see the “hand of God” and in which she sees “the Universe bringing the project together.”

But no matter what name we call it, we both sense that this film is something greater than all of the crew put together. We’re just along for the ride, and I am humbled that the project chose me. ●

To learn more about Divided We Fall, visit the Web site at www.dwf-film.com. The film is currently in post-production in Los Angeles and will be shown at film festivals throughout the United States in the coming year. The crew hopes for an eventual theatrical or television release.