

## **Living in affordable housing**

*Remarks by Mubeen Qureshi to the ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum, Queen's Park, Nov. 5/09  
Shalimar International Housing (Mississauga)*

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I thought since this is a faith-based community, I thought I would start with my remarks – with thanking God.

My name is Mubeen Qureshi, and I myself came about 35 years ago and at that time the immigration was all educated people coming from South Asia. Fine, no problem, we integrated quite well.

But then during the course of time immigration opened and more and more people started coming from South Asian countries and some were educated and some were not educated. And the country wasn't this bad – believe me – and so now most of the problems come because of such hard times and the people who have come are finding it hard to find jobs.

They are finding it hard to integrate, it's taking a lot longer, and 35-37 years ago it was a bit easier. Keeping that in mind, about 20 years ago we were concerned we would have Sunday schools because we are a faith based organization, we would have language schools and we didn't want our culture and religion to be dissolved or forgotten (with the new generation so that was enough). But finally what happened was that as more and more immigrants came, they couldn't find jobs and there was housing crisis.

The mosques found they didn't have enough places to place these people; they didn't have enough resources to help because they were struggling themselves. They were thinking of building buildings, they were thinking of running programs, paying for the staff and volunteers were few and far between. I'm sure you all face that, everybody had to go out and look for a job first and there were few who were settled. You need a very strong commitment to volunteer and that's how our group started.

My experience with non-profit housing is that we started a group and I was working with a multicultural council that was having a lot of applications with a lot of immigrants that didn't have houses. In Mississauga the renting of basement apartments was not allowed at the time – it wasn't legal – so that made it all the more difficult. There were not that many apartments at a reasonable rent. Now, of course, there are a lot of apartments in Mississauga.

I talk about Mississauga because I have lived in Mississauga for the past 27 years. Mississauga is a growing place and everybody knows there are a lot of immigrants who come to Mississauga and find their homes in there. When Shalimar Housing started we had to lobby really hard because we were a new group. At that time Bob Rae's NDP Government was in Parliament and that was a time when many of our projects got funded and Shalimar was one of those groups. After having the funding there was a lot of community resentment, the neighbours and neighborhood groups – who is this group wearing hijabs and why are they coming into our community and they would mix.

Anyways, we crossed all of those barriers and built a 78-unit complex; it's a beautiful complex. The houses are all around and the community centre sits in the middle. It has a courtyard and this was very, very helpful because it integrated all the people, the kids played together, we had a basketball court put in there. I will talk a lot about the programs because that is what I am big on. My kids were all growing at the time and I didn't want them going into schools and picking up bad habits and stunts or many of those things which were unheard of when I was growing up, or the culture I came from, so we tried to keep our young people very, very busy.

We would rent the neighbouring school for 2 nights a week; there is a basketball in the centre of the court and all the time there are educational programs. There are recreational programs; there is some sort of activity going on. We hope that from these young people we will become good volunteers, who will carry the torch forward.

Now, the problem for ladies, the literacy programs, the computer programs (as my previous speaker did speak about), there are a lot of similar programs that the Muslim community does as well that helps integrate into the society. That helps them get jobs and mainly it helps the mothers to understand what the teachers are saying in the school. They don't have to hide their report card where mother doesn't know what is happening, so the mother is very involved because she can read the report card and she can go and talk to the teachers and go to the teacher/parent meetings and that was our objective.

And now what I find after 20 years is that we have so many seniors and there are not enough senior citizen places or if there are, they are too expensive. At this time the immigrant community coming – the South Asian community coming - cannot afford the \$2500-3000 to place a parent in a home, so we do need senior citizen homes.

We need a lot of housing for young families because if we do not really work hard (and we've got to work together – we are all in it for the same goal) – it is the dignity that a person has when they are housed properly. Housing is the major, major concern of any community, of any young person. If they have a house they cannot afford, the grocery bills are cut – they cannot cut on from housing, so the housing has to be affordable for these families. They'll take a bus; they'll walk, but what about a house? They cannot live outside on the road with 2-3 kids, so our group is really working hard for this particular issue.

The Mosques are trying their best too – they do subsidize for families that come. But that is temporary; that is not a permanent solution. The affordable housing needs to be there. In Mississauga especially I see the prices of the houses are so high. I was speaking to one of the gentlemen here that a semi-detached costs \$400,000 and what do you get for \$400,000? It's amazing; it's a small house. Another child cannot come and live with a parent anymore because of lack of space, because of affordability.

After having spoken to a few of the people in the room I find that these are the same problems that all of the communities face. Our community senses that we are the last community – we came 30 years or so – and we have to struggle a little harder and understand the system a little more to be able to help the communities at large.

Thank you.