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Metro

Grafton man central to response of Wisconsin temple

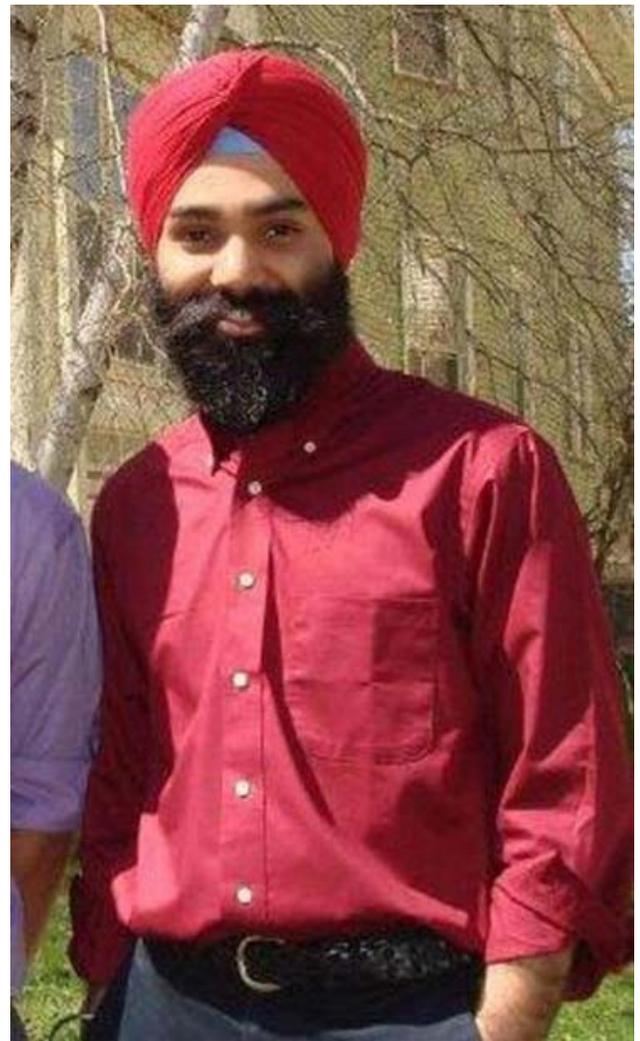
By Zachary T. Sampson and Matt Rocheleau | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS AUGUST 06, 2012

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Shortly after Harpreet Singh of Grafton learned about the shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis., where a gunman killed six people before police fatally shot him, anxious inquiries started pouring in from Sikhs in the Milwaukee area.

Singh, a veterinarian resident at Tufts University, said he has long been a central figure at the temple. As one of its most fluent English speakers, he often spoke for his largely misunderstood religious minority, and he gave community classes on Sikh culture.



Harpreet Singh shown in Madison, Wis., in 2010.

And now Sikhs in the Milwaukee area were asking how to help out. They did not ask Singh if it was a hate crime.

“We tend to know that a lot of things that happen to us are hate-crime-related,” Singh, 27, said. “There’s a certain amount of anger that comes along with this, and at the same time, it’s very sad.”

Three others were also injured in an assault that authorities deemed an act of domestic terrorism. Authorities in Wisconsin said Sunday night the motive for the killings was not immediately clear.

Singh, who moved to Massachusetts a year ago, said Sikhs in America are frequently the victims of hate crimes because their turbans and long beards are often mistaken as symbols of Islamic extremism.

“People in general are just very under-educated and very ignorant when it comes to recognizing differences,” Singh said by phone from New York, where he was at a Sikh event.

Sikhs are devotees of a faith that developed in the 15th century in Asia, according to UNITED SIKHS, a United Nations-affiliated nonprofit relief and advocacy organization. Practitioners wear their hair long, do not use alcohol or tobacco, and believe in universal love as the key

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‘A lot of things . . . are hate crime-

to truth. There about 23 million adherents worldwide, many in the Punjab region of India; about 314,000 Sikhs live in the United States.

related'

At a vigil outside the Sikh temple in Milford on Sunday night, about 20 people stood in a circle around the Nishan Sahib, a yellow, triangular flag that is the sacred banner of the Sikhs. They said a prayer, chanted, and sang while holding candles. Some had traveled from as far as New Hampshire to attend the ceremony.

“We are an extremely resilient community, we’ve had to struggle a lot, but we’ve always bounced back,” said Sarbpreet Singh, 48, of Hopkinton.

Several members of the congregation said the vigil was reminiscent of similar services held after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, when Sikhs were targeted in hate crimes.

“This is an important moment for the community,” said Singh, a Milford congregation member who is not related to Harpreet Singh. “A lot of people see this as a teachable moment.”

After Sept. 11, Harpreet Singh said, many Sikhs discarded their turbans and cut their beards to avoid being mistaken for Muslim extremists. A possible reaction of Sikhs who remember the aftermath of 9/11, he said, “is going to be that we need to lay low.”

At the same time, he said, Sikhs under age 30 seemed more interested in taking action. He said he directed those most fluent in English to represent the community to the media. Others brought lunch and drinks to members of the congregation who stood outside the temple following the attack.

During the day, Harpreet Singh stayed in contact with family who live within two blocks of the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin.

One of his sisters helps run a class that teaches dozens of children Punjabi, the Sikh’s spoken language, and Gurmukhi, their script. The class was set to be underway when the shooting occurred. His sister was late and was not there.

At that time, Singh said, several adults were likely preparing for the arrival of the main congregation after 11 a.m.

Other practitioners were likely in the kitchen preparing for langar, which Singh described as an open kitchen for anyone that comes into the temple.

At langar, Sikhs sit on the floor — symbolically lowering themselves and renouncing their social status — then eat before meditation and prayer, Singh said.

Word of the shooting spread rapidly among Sikhs across the country. In Massachusetts, Singh said, Sikhs have had good relations with the communities where they have temples, such as Millis and Milford. He said he hopes that Sikhs in coming weeks work to change perceptions about their faith.

“I feel like now that this has happened, that has to be a top priority,” he said. “It’s not about educating people in our own religion, it has to be more than that.”

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