



Local advocate says Sikhs are misunderstood

By Michael Haynes mhaynes@kpcnews.net
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KENDALLVILLE — Sunday’s shooting at a Sikh house of worship in Oak Creek, Wis., has brought up questions about the Sikh community, said Lori Way, a former Kendallville resident who lives in Fort Wayne.



Sikh women, men, and children hold candles during a prayer vigil at the Sikh Religious Society temple in Palatine, Ill., Monday. The vigil was held in memory of those killed and wounded at a Sikh temple shooting near Milwaukee over the weekend. (AP Photo)

Way is an advocate for The Sikh Coalition, an organization that works toward equal rights among all people. The coalition especially works with the Sikh community, whose members Way said are often discriminated against in the workplace and bullied in schools.

“If people are educated to what the community is all about, (it can) help to dispel some of the myths about the Sikhs,” said Way.

The Sikh Coalition Bay Area Civil Rights Report 2010 is a booklet that gives facts and information about the discrimination Sikhs face. One statistic says 10 percent of Sikhs reported being a victim of a hate crime, 68 percent of which were physical attacks.

Way thinks hate crime caused the shooting in Wisconsin. She believes the hate crimes are also a result of thinking Sikhs are terrorists, a false assumption.

“(The shooting is) devastating for the entire community, because it really shakes the sense of trust you have,” Way said. She said the Sikhs allow anybody of any faith to come in and worship with them, and “they probably would’ve welcomed this individual with open arms, this person who ends up shooting them.”

Way said websites have been started to donate to aid the shooting victims’ families, and candlelight vigils are being held — one at the Sikh Gurdwara Fort Wayne on Lower Huntington Road at 7 p.m. Sunday.

Some of the Sikhs’ beliefs are in equality for all and that no religion is better than another. They are a monotheistic religion, believe in hard work and giving back and are proponents of prayer.

There is a heavy population of Sikhs in California, around 200,000, but there is also a population in northeast Indiana. Way said there is more of a concentration of Sikhs in the Fort Wayne area, around 55 to 65 families, and the population is growing. Sikhs worship in gurdwaras, or houses of worship. Two Sikh gurdwaras can be found in Fort Wayne.

Way said the Sikh community is most often discriminated against because the men wear turbans and have long hair and beards. It is against their religion to cut their hair.

“I’ve had a lot of Sikh men tell me ... they’d love to have turbans and beards, but they can’t get jobs,” Way said. These men will sometimes compromise their beliefs to get jobs.

Way said Sikhs also face discrimination in airport terminals when going through security.

“Most of the Sikhs we have talked to say they are randomly screened 100 percent of the time,” Way said.

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She said in May, the Sikh Coalition came out with an application called FlyRights for the iPhone and Android phones that allow people to make complaints to the TSA and DHS about security checkpoints.

"From January to May, the TSA self-reported 11 complaints nationwide against their screening checkpoints," Way said. "When (FlyRights) came out, from May to June, they've had 100 complaints. It was very much underreported until now. This allows you to report problems in real time."

Way said discrimination is detrimental to the Sikh community and the only way to help stop discrimination is to educate people on who the Sikhs are and what they do.

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