

Gilbert Restaurant Owner Remembers 9/11

Written by By David M. Brown

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For Rana Singh Sodhi, the 10-year-anniversary of 9/11 means remembrance and reaffirmation.



Balbir Singh Sodhi

His brother, Balbir Singh Sodhi, was murdered at a family-owned gas station in Mesa just hours after the 9/11 attacks by a man now serving life imprisonment in Florence for the hate crime.

He saw Balbir, a member of the Sikh religion, whose male adherents wear turbans, connected this with terrorism and shot him. He died four days later.

Rana and fellow Gilbert resident, Surinder Singh, opened Guru Palace, 2048 E. Baseline Road, #1 (in the Trader Joe's shopping center) about five years ago. The Mesa restaurant, which specializes in Punjabi, or northern Indian food, is open every day. Lunch is 11 a.m.–2:30 p.m. with a lunch buffet, and dinner is 5–10 p.m. Rana and Surinder are not related.

A Gilbert resident for seven years, Singh has been in the Valley for 21 years. Born in the Punjab area of northern India, he immigrated to Los Angeles in 1987 and then moved to Palm Springs.



Rana Singh Sodhi (photo D. Brown)

"A decade means an opportunity for education and to invite people to remember the victims of 9/11 and all victims of hate crimes," he says.

Singh and his wife of 18 years, Sukhbir Kaur Sodhi, are parents to son, Satpreet Singh Sodhi, 16, daughter Rose Kaur Sodhi, 17, both students at Gilbert's Mesquite High School, and Bhavdeep Singh Sodhi, 13, a son who attends Mesquite Junior High School, also in Gilbert.

Rose and Surinder Singh's daughter, Manvir, work part time in the restaurant, which is colorfully decorated with hand-painted scenes such as the Taj Mahal.

Ten months after the killing of Balbir, Singh lost a second brother to gunshot wounds. Sukhpal Singh Sodhi, a taxi driver in San Francisco, was, however, probably killed because he was "in the wrong place at the wrong time," he says.

Always wearing a turban in public, he is also a member of the 500-year-old Sikh religion and estimates that approximately 1,000 Valley families attend one of the group's four temples here.

He also participates actively with organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League in actively opposing all forms of religious and racial injustice. To honor his many community efforts, he and his wife were hosted a year ago by President Obama and the first lady at a White House state dinner welcoming the prime minister of India.

He will be attending the Sept. 11 memorial event at Wesley Bolin Plaza in Phoenix, 11 a.m.–12:30 p.m., and invites the community to join him. And, with Arizona Interfaith Network, he is holding a memorial service Sept. 15, 7–8 p.m., at the family gas station where Balbir was murdered, 80th Street and University Drive in Mesa.

"The message of 9-11," Singh says, "is to understand what happened that day and not let it happen again," he says. "My wish, and the Singh family's, is that my brother Balbir's spirit will be celebrated as one of hope and understanding."

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