

Sultan Mohammed Deen

From: Mok, Jeannie. Multicultural Trailblazers, Brisbane, Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland and Multicultural Community Centre, 2004 (pp 59-64)



Sultan Deen with Premier Peter Beattie.

There would be few Pakistani Muslims in Australia who can claim to be fifth generation migrants. An exception is Sultan Deen of the famous Deen 'Demolition' brothers with their catchy motto, "All we leave behind are the memories." In the late 1860's Sultan's great, great, great grand-uncle was a camel train merchant in outback Australia. He was not allowed to bring in his family, so he traveled back and forth to India. In time though, the Deen family settled in Australia and Sultan himself was born in Brisbane in September 1949, the second eldest in a family of seven boys and two girls.

By then, his family was extremely well established and respected in the small Muslim community comprising four or five major families who dated from the turn of the

century. His grandfather was the Honorary High Commissioner for Pakistan and consequently, kept an eye on the growing number of Indian Muslim students coming to study under the Colombo Plan program. Sultan's family helped in the settlement needs of these newcomers, and he says as long as he can remember, they were always volunteering their help! It thus has been a family tradition to play a leading role in the community and the mantle fell on Sultan's shoulders a long time ago.

When Sultan was 18 years old, he was already the Assistant Secretary of the Holland Park Mosque Association, assisting in the construction of a new building in 1966. The first mosque in the state had been constructed on that site in 1908. After the demolition of the old building, the whole Muslim community came to mix the concrete by hand, and to help wherever possible. Even now, 30 odd years later, he serves on the same mosque committee. The Deen family members are devout Muslims and are proud that the family business made it possible for them to lay the foundations for every mosque in Brisbane free of charge.

Furthermore, before the 1980s there were no 'halal' butchers in the state, so the Deen family took it upon themselves to supply the approximately 500-strong Muslim community with 'halal' beef and 300 sheep once a month, at cost. On a more personal level, Sultan has performed four 'Hajs' to Mecca, and finds these pilgrimages spiritually uplifting.

The Deen family's voluntary work helping the disadvantaged in their community has continued even when family fortunes were at its lowest ebb. For instance, in the early sixties, their mother passed away, and in 1964, they lost everything they had in a disastrous fire. The hardships experienced as a result of the resulting financial woes

have only firmed Sultan's desire to help others in need, since he appreciates how they feel. "We must do what we can – we all have had hard times in our lives."

Sultan is the past President of the Islamic Council, a position that he occupied for 4 years. And he has held every position possible on the Council that helps oversee all the mosque associations in Queensland. Recently, the Rockhampton Mosque Association appealed to the Council for a loan to purchase the building once occupied by the Greek Orthodox Church. The Council began fund-raising initiatives and was able to raise \$165,000 in two months.

The Islamic Council also oversees the establishment of Muslim schools in Queensland and Sultan was a founding member of the first Islamic school in Karawatha which receives private school Government funding, and where 400 students follow the state school curriculum. Sultan is now Development Co-ordinator for another Muslim school in Durack, since the present school in Buranda holds only 120 students.

Since every Queensland mosque boasts a soccer team, Sultan finds himself involved in several sporting clubs. He is Patron of the Muslim Sports Association of Queensland, which has existed for 10 years, as well as the Muslim Sports Association of Fiji and the United Sports Association. He also formed the Pakistani Australian Cultural Association, which is still functioning, ten years later.

Sultan's religious commitment has led to him helping other non-Muslim religious groups. For instance, he helped Rev Alan Male with the Shaftsbury Centre in Burpengary, which assists in the rehabilitation of young people released from prison. For his efforts Sultan was given the title 'Honorary Earl of Shaftsbury'.

He also realizes the importance of 'inter-faith dialogue' the need for which has become all the more urgent after the post - September 11 attacks on Brisbane mosques and strives to maintain harmonious relations with other ethnic communities. For the last 3 years, Sultan has been involved in the bi-monthly meetings with Catholic and Jewish leaders. He also served on the task force to build the Multi-Faith Centre at Griffith University.

He found the September 11 events horrifying and sees it as the product of "*misguided individuals*." Sultan says: "Good Muslims would never have contemplated such a terrible deed." But every cloud has a silver lining and since that tragedy, "everyone wants to know more about Islam."

He therefore greatly appreciates the efforts of other people in promoting a genuine appreciation and understanding of other cultures and religions. For nine years he has acted as the Chairperson of the Police Ethnic Advisory Group founded in 1990 and has involved Muslims in the many activities organized by Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ). In the days of the Warana festival, the Deen brothers sponsored several floats.

But Sultan's voluntary work extends to the wider community - he has a very high profile in the media and is often approached for help. His demolition business that was responsible for the controversial demise of Cloudland twenty two years ago, has resulted in photos of Sultan and his brothers appearing on the front page of the newspapers ever so often.

With parts of Queensland suffering from a severe drought in past years, Sultan was asked to chair the Drought Relief Fund-raising Program. In this capacity, Sultan

accompanied his trucks to deliver supplies and fodder to outback farmers ten years ago. Every two weeks over a period of time, four or five of his trucks went out west to areas around St. George and northern New South Wales.



Sultan Deen with family in Award Ceremony

This charitable deed occurred under the auspices of Rotary and Sultan is personally very heavily involved in the activities of the Archerfield Rotary Club. He has been a member of that club for the last 16 years. Since 1988 he has served as President, Vice-President and other Executive positions. In 1990 he was appointed to the Board of Directors for Rotary. Most of his Rotary projects have centred on fund-raising activities for local initiatives, but the club has also been involved in student-exchange programs. His family business pitched in when the earthworks for the Rotary Lodge at Wesley Hospital needed to be done. He was awarded the honour of a “Paul Harris Fellowship” by his Rotary Club, in recognition of all that he has done for Rotary.

Sultan’s other fund-raising projects have provided support for the Fred Hollows Foundation work in Suva, the provision of computers to Fijian schools and support of Queensland Olympic swimmers. He is also Chairperson of the Brisvaani Aid Foundation originally set up to help people from Fiji obtain urgent medical support; but this work soon extended into flood and drought relief work and projects to assist indigenous people. He explains his interest in this vast range of programs as he finds it almost impossible to say ‘No’ to people who are in need of help. It is also part of his religious commitment that he demonstrates compassion and mercy towards his fellow beings.

Ironically, Sultan has in the past nine years, been actively involved with a conservation group, the Oxley Creek Catchment Association. He sees no conflict in this and his occupation:

“I have only carried out demolition work that has been approved by the appropriate authorities. Other people may call my work vandalism, but I am merely carrying out a job that has been legally allowed. When I move in with my bulldozers, I am only implementing the important decisions already made by key people. I do not allow criticism to overly worry me. In a recent job at Maleny, a protestor called me a ‘bloody immigrant’ and yelled at me to ‘go home’. I found out his family had arrived in Australia in the 1950s so I had the utmost satisfaction of informing him I was a fifth generation Australian!”

His wife Kamrun and five children Aysha, Zareena, Yasmeen, Hafeez and Aziz, have always been supportive of his voluntary work. After all, he is only continuing a time-honoured family tradition. But Sultan also sees his community work as a service done for God since his Muslim commitment is the overriding factor in his life. In a way, he feels, what he does is selfish since his religious beliefs tell him to expect a reward for his good deeds later on! So as long as he can, Sultan intends to give and give and give – his time, effort and money.

Appreciation has come his way in the form of a variety of awards. In 2001, Sultan received a Multicultural Service Award from the Queensland Premier, and, in the Year of Volunteers, he received a volunteering award. He has also been given countless Appreciation Certificates by the various groups that he has supported. Most significantly, he realizes that he and his brothers are affectionately regarded by many sections of Brisbane society. Wherever he goes, he is recognized and acknowledged. This positive public profile is more than Sultan ever expected or wanted: “Whatever the circumstances you do your bit and keep on doing it! And don’t expect thanks from any quarter; after all, you’re the one who ends up with the good feeling!”