

# **Activism Abroad: Sikh Volunteer promotes Interfaith Understanding**

*Courtesy: The Columbus Dispatch\**

When the call goes out for interfaith advocates, Tarunjit Singh Butalia responds.

His attendance at many community events and neighborhood meetings as a representative of the Sikh faith and member of the Interfaith Association of Central Ohio, makes him seem to be everywhere.

He's also secretary of the Sikh Educational Religious Foundation in Dublin and serves on the World Sikh Council, American region. The numerous e-mails and faxes he sends add to his ubiquity.

Observers envy Butalia's seemingly endless energy, but he laments that, at 36, he can't keep up the pace of his younger years.

Butalia came to this country 13 years ago to study civil engineering at Ohio State University, where he now works as a research scientist. He served on the University Senate and took part in campus activities, including a variety of interfaith and multicultural programs.

"A lot of people perceive me as a messenger," he said. "I treat that responsibility very carefully."

The local Sikh community used to meet in homes or at the Park of Roses. During Butalia's time in Columbus, it has doubled to 100 families and has built its own temple, Gurdwara Sahib of Central Ohio, in Perry Township.

Although Butalia was born to Sikh parents, he didn't fully embrace the religion until his graduate days.

He proudly wears symbols of Sikhism - turban, beard and bracelet - fully aware they attract derision from those who don't understand or appreciate his faith. He supports other Sikhs, but is clear about his religious priorities.

"I see myself as a person of faith first, then as a Sikh."

Butalia dates his first interfaith experience to his youth in Delhi, India, where he befriended a Muslim boy his age.

He continues to lead by example to religious people of all ages, including his wife, Ramneet, and their daughters, Jasjit and Simranjit.

Alvin Hadley, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Church Council, calls Butalia "an extraordinary leader and consensus builder." He is very focused and relates well in bringing people together," Hadley said.

The Rev. Rebecca Tollefson, executive director of the Ohio Council of Churches, admires Butalia's non-confrontational style in dealing with interfaith matters.

"He's helped to make some significant bridges in the interfaith community," she said.

Butalia is working with Tollefson on a book about religions of Ohio. It's to be printed next year for the state's bicentennial. He thinks it's a significant example of how the interfaith community is moving beyond dialogue to collaboration.

Butalia gets disheartened when members of any religion assert that their faith is more valid than another. Efforts to make converts imply a sense of superiority, he said.

But ways exist to forge bonds across faiths, he believes.

"People do open their heart over food and become more open to share what's on their mind," Butalia said.

He feels vested in central Ohio, saying, "Home never gets better than this."

"I feel very fortunate to be in a place where there is respect of people for each other - not to say that we don't have a very long way to go," he said. "We have quite some way to go as a community."

Whom would you suggest?

*Faith & Values* publishes monthly profiles of central Ohioans whose religion has inspired them to extraordinary selflessness or longtime dedication to the welfare of others. To nominate someone for this recognition, please e-mail Mark fisher at [mfisher@dispatch.com](mailto:mfisher@dispatch.com); fax him at 614-461-7571; or write him at 34, S. 3rd St. Columbus, Ohio, 43215. Please include an explanation.



## **My Holy Amritsar Experience**

***Neha Sabharwal\****

Growing up in America, my sister and I have smoothly adapted to the Sikh rituals and way of life, which my parents have lived through. We share the same beliefs as any other Sikh.

In the summer of 2002, we shared a wonderful experience in India. We had the greatest opportunity of a lifetime and visited the Golden Temple, a place so extraordinary that seeing the view of it is breathtaking. I had always heard great things about the Golden Temple and how people strongly wish to see it and visit it. But I'd never actually seen it myself. As I walked down the long hallway, which opened into the Golden Temple, I was cast spellbound by the golden shimmer of the beautiful Temple. It was hard to believe that I had finally seen the temple of my dreams. The peaceful music found its way into my ears and colored pictures in my mind.

Everywhere I walked I read about the history of the Gurus who have helped build Sikhism. I was engrossed in the stories about the Gurus, the Gurus who I pray to every night. I learned about the sacrifices they made to help create the beliefs of Sikhism. Seeing the tree that has lived since Guru Nanak, made me want to touch it - to almost feel the strong power that has lived since the Gurus.

Everything in the Golden Temple seemed so new and far away, yet it was so close to me. I didn't want to leave the peace of the Temple and wanted to stay there forever. Yet I knew that was impossible. I felt as if the Golden Temple was where I belonged, but I only had a few days to visit it - those few days that I will cherish forever.



Neha is 11 and is a student of The Harker Academy, a highly rated private school in San Jose, CA. She is an Honor Roll Student and has represented Harker in Destination Imagination, a statewide Inter school competition. She is an elected member of the School Student Body; has won several awards for academic excellence, leadership and as all-rounder.

She is pro-active in community service projects and volunteers at a Nursing Home playing piano for the elderly residents over the Christmas holidays.

Subsequent to the tragedy of 9-11, she took the initiative and made presentation on Sikhism to the School faculty and students. She is a regular participant in the Vaisakhi Cultural event for several years and is proud of her Sikh heritage.

Neha has been selected by her school to travel to Japan for two weeks this coming summer as an exchange student.

Her father, Harjit, is an IIT, Kanpur and Wisconsin Graduate, and her mother, Harleen, is a Nizam College, Hyderabad graduate and Chartered Accountant. They live in Sunnyvale, California, USA.