

Free Clinic Healing Los Angeles A Decade After Riots

Kaiser Permanente Pediatrician Cofounds Muslim Clinic

By Karla Pérez Villalta

Two blocks from the epicenter of the 1992 Los Angeles riots stood a symptom of what ailed the city—an abandoned childcare facility, closed due to violations, where prostitutes and drug dealers sold their wares. Ashes, violence, and the momentum from the events that year gave way to the dreams of eight Muslim UCLA students. Together they established the University Muslim Medical Association (UMMA) Free Clinic on that very spot.

Altaf Kazi, MD, a pediatrician at Kaiser Permanente's (KP) West LA Medical Center, was one of the eight students. He said the idea for a free clinic had been fermenting in their minds long before the riots, in

keeping with one of the five pillars of their Islamic faith—to perform acts of charity. The riots called attention to the third-world-like conditions of the LA inner city and opened doors for them.

Councilwoman Rita Walters, now retired, was impressed with the “naïve students with no political affiliation,” Dr Kazi said. “She took us in in an almost motherly way, mentored and helped us.”

Before long, Walters' staff secured \$650,000 of city funds for the project. The city bulldozed the decrepit building and assigned an architect to work with the students to build the clinic from the ground up. Dr Kazi's father, Mohammad Kazi, an architect, had already designed the clinic free of charge. The students

got a \$700,000 grant from the US Housing and Urban Development Department to run the clinic and gathered more than \$150,000 in equipment and supplies from corporate donations. Drew University and UCLA School of Medicine stepped in as sponsors and continue to use the clinic as a teaching institution for third- and fourth-year medical students. KP has donated more than \$32,500 to the clinic since 2000.

UMMA Free Clinic opened in 1996. Today, it is a state-of-the-art primary care facility with a patient base of 6000 adults and children—all below the federal poverty line. Five paid employees, including one part-time physician, and a pool of more than 100 volunteer physicians, nurses, physician assistants, and students make up the clinic's staff. Dr Kazi clocked in 705 volunteer hours in 2001 as an attending pediatrician, faculty supervisor-preceptor, and



University Muslim Medical Association (UMMA) Free Clinic



Altaf Kazi, MD, examines patient at UMMA free clinic.

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board member. UMMA is beginning a feasibility study to expand the site in the near future.

“The physical facility and how it’s set up, run, and managed is more on a par with a private practice that you would find in West Los Angeles than a community-run free clinic,” Dr Kazi said.

A patient at UMMA added, “It’s not a run-down place. It’s a nice place, set up like a regular doctor’s office where you have regular insurance. They treat you like that. That makes a big difference, when you’re treated with dignity.”



The community’s support spoke loudest during the post-September 11 climate of distrust toward Muslims. When the clinic organized a blood drive to benefit victims in New York, more than 100 donors showed up in a single day.

“Rather than receive backlash from the community,”

said Dr Kazi, “they helped us show that this project is a shining example of Islamic humanitarianism and compassion. If you go in and roll up your sleeves and help people in need, they respect you.”

“It’s a humble step in fulfilling a religious obligation for me as well as making a significant contribution to the lives of children and families in need,” he said. “It’s satisfying on an emotional, spiritual, and professional level. As physicians, we all went into medicine to serve people, but the medical arena nowadays is very businesslike. UMMA Free Clinic reminds me why I went into medicine in the first place.” ♦

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**UMMA Free Clinic is seeking physician volunteers. For more information, please contact
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To Do Good

The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.

— Thomas Paine, 1737-1809, Revolutionary War patriot