

An American Hero

An Interview with Talat Hamdani

Tina Lee

Talat Hamdani is the mother of Salman Hamdani, an emergency medical technician and cadet with the New York Police Department who died on 9/11, while trying to rescue his fellow Americans.

Salman Hamdani was working as a lab technician at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. It is believed that on September 11, he was en route to his job in Manhattan when he saw the burning towers, abandoned his commute, and rushed to the World Trade Center to offer his services as a paramedic. His subsequent disappearance led to rumors that he had been involved in the attacks, solely because he was a Muslim. Salman Hamdani's remains were discovered near the north tower and his name was finally cleared in March 2002. He was declared a hero posthumously.

Talat Hamdani is a member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. She was one of the 9/11 family members who met privately with President Obama during his visit to Ground Zero on May 5, 2011. Peaceful Tomorrows released a statement at the time to Obama urging the President to pursue a path to peace, to close the U.S.

military prison housing at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and to bring home U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Could you tell us why you decided to join September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows?

I found a whole group of people who shared my pain. But the most important factor that at-

tracted me was the mission of non-violence.

Sometimes I wonder if there is a natural desire for revenge when someone you love is taken from you. How do you not succumb to that?

I am not a revengeful person. I was raised by my grandmother. Every time I got angry, she told me, "Pray to God and say, 'Please, God, guide them to the path of justice.'" I tried to teach this message to my children. The members of Peaceful Tomorrows have the same perspective on life that I do.

After losing my child, after having suffered such *tremendous* pain—and it was such a tremendous pain when I think about those days—I really am grateful to my God that He has pulled me out of that depression. I cannot even imagine inflicting that kind of pain on my worst enemy!

It sounds like you have relied on your faith.

During the summer of 2001, I had finished reading the Qu'ran in English. It took me two years. In moments of intense grief, I would pick up the Qu'ran and read the passages about death. And that gave me comfort: everybody has to die.

So in your darkest moments, it gave you at least a little bit of support.

A lot of support. My family was there, my friends were there, but in those moments of solitude, it was the Qur'an that I would read. Then I started reading the Qu'ran from the perspective of being a *human being*, not only a Muslim. And I realized that the Qu'ran addresses and values everybody.



Salman (in photos on this page and with his parents on the next page).

Many people do not know Islam, so we need to educate them. Many Americans were introduced to this faith in a very violent fashion. After the 10th anniversary of 9/11, I'm going to start talking on campuses and at libraries about what Islam really is.

After 9/11, a lot of Muslim-Americans and Americans who were perceived as Muslim came under suspicion. Your son was honored as an American hero. What do you think makes someone an American?

An American person is someone who is hard-working. Someone with tolerance towards other faiths and races, because we are a people of all different origins and nationalities. Someone who gives top priority to the law of the land. As an American, you have to stand by your nation; you have to be committed to standing up for your morals and values: freedom, liberty, and justice not only for yourself but more so for others. That's what it means to me. A person of good moral values who does not interfere in other people's business and has mutual respect for others.

Could you tell us a little bit about your meeting with President Obama on May 5, 2011?

Sure. I was very anxious the night before. What will he ask? What should I say? I was very tense. I went there with my son. President Obama went to the microphone and he said, "We have brought Bin Laden to justice. And when we told you we have not forgotten you, we meant every word of



the sentence. And we have not forgotten you. And this celebration is about the resiliency of you people" – which is so true. I can understand that because now, ten years later, my two sons and I, thank God, we have come back and we

are contributing members of society. And we are happy now.

And then President Obama came to our table and extended his hand out. I said, in Arabic, "A'salaam alaikum," which means "Peace be upon you," and he said, "Wa'alaikum asalaam," which means, "And upon you be peace." I knew he knew how to respond. Otherwise, I wouldn't have said it.

Then he asked me, "Who did you lose?" and I said, "My son." I was wearing his pin. And he said, "Tell me about him." So I told him, Salman was a very kind and compassionate young man, very humble. He wanted to become a medical doctor. He was a Star Wars fan; his license plate was "Yung Jedi." For him, it was an honor to live and work under the American flag. I said to the President, "I can't believe that I'm here. Salman would really be happy to see his mom talking to the President. He was such a proud American."

It was a big statement that my President and, through him, my nation, is standing with me now, finally, after ten years.

What's next for you?

I see we now need to look to the future, usher in a new era of peace, and get out of revenge and violence. We need to restore our rule of law, close

down Guantanamo, and I hope the anti-Muslim sentiment that has overtaken our country comes to an end. We are one nation and we need to come together and move forward in unity.



Talat (right) with Ruth Chu, from the Asian American Pacific Island Caucus. They participated on a panel about civil liberties post 9/11.

Talat Hamdani has set up the Salman Hamdani Memorial Scholarship for students of Pakistani descent. Tina Lee is an adult literacy/ESOL tutor at the Seward Park Library's Center for Reading and Writing. She has lived in New York for 14 years.