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Torched mosque rises like phoenix

by Dave Roberts

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The speakers at Saturday's inauguration ceremony for the reopened Islamic Center of East Bay mosque, which has arisen like a phoenix from the ashes of an arson fire two years ago, focused on the positive that has emerged from the negative.

The arsonist or arsonists have yet to be found in the torching of the center on Aug. 11, 2007, causing \$200,000 damage and shutting down the facility for nearly two years. The fire followed on the hate-filled heels of vandalism, threatening phone messages and shots fired into the empty building at night. Mosque officials and members debated whether they wanted to rebuild or even remain in Antioch, given the violence and hostility they encountered.

"Some opined that the place was unsafe, as women and children come here," said center President Mohammad Ashraf Chaudhry to the standing-room-only crowd in the mosque meeting room. "Others suggested that a piece of land be acquired, and a new center be constructed there. There were others who advised that the money be donated to another center, and the Islamic Center here be closed. Very few of us saw any opportunity in the adversity that had visited us without any fault of ours."

However, a strong outpouring of community support in October of 2007, when 350 people marched from Antioch City Hall to the mosque on East 18th Street carrying signs reading "Peace," "Stop the Hate," "Not In My Town," and "Coexist" might have convinced mosque leaders to stay and rebuild.

"I, enjoined by a few, saw a silver lining lurking somewhere in the charred structure that once was our Islamic Center," said Chaudhry. "Taking this unfortunate incident as an isolated and unfortunate happening, we kept seeing some bright stars even when the nights had been dark and bleak. In this adversity (we) found a huge fund of very caring and good friends like you."

One of those friends was Antioch Mayor Jim Davis, who was then a councilman when he heard a report on the police scanner about a fire on East 18th Street and drove right over with his wife to check it out.

"Knowing some previous problems we had had in this area regarding this building, my heart sank," said Davis when he heard the scanner report and saw that it was in fact the Islamic mosque that was burning. "Our hearts were torn, our pride was hurt and we were deeply saddened for all of you. Although a bad thing happened here ... I'm so grateful you decided to stay here in Antioch. This is your home. You're welcome here. You're a part of our community."

"I grew up in a household of very strong women, pioneer women. One of the things that was traditional in our family was that they made quilts. It takes each and every one of those patches together to make a strong quilt. You are all a part of that wonderful quilt of America. Without you, that quilt would not be as strong

as it is today. We are indeed grateful to have you back in your home. With our sincere love and appreciation, congratulations.”

Chaudhry said it had been a struggle to build the original mosque in the first place. “I started it with the help of a dozen friends from scratch without any money but with lots of hope – until it took us 10 years and over \$300,000 collected virtually in the form of dollars and dimes until we got the place paid off,” he said. “Now once again I had to start all over again, but this time not from scratch but from a heap of debris and doubts.”

He received appreciative laughter, particularly from the government officials in attendance, when he discussed the red tape he had to wade through to rebuild. “There was an endless challenge of meeting new fire and city department codes, which often appeared as an impossible task,” he said. “They always smiled when they would hand over a new set of obligations. Perhaps Shakespeare wrote these lines for them: ‘One may smile and smile, and yet be a villain.’”

State Sen. Mark DeSaulnier also drew laughter when he picked up on that theme in his remarks. “When you went through those trials and tribulations with the city and the county, they were just following state law, so it’s our fault,” he said. “There’s an old saying that we’re from the government and we’re here to help.”

On a more serious note, Antioch Police Chief Jim Hyde summed up the feeling of many in his remarks: “It’s so wonderful to be here for the rededication, reopening of the Islamic Center of the East Bay. We stand shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in the Antioch community. You are the fabric of Antioch, the diversity of Antioch, the hard workers of Antioch.

“It broke our hearts when the fire occurred, and the struggles and tough times you have been through. In helping folks through tough times, they first feel like they are a victim. Then they feel like they are a survivor. They are truly blessed when they become thrivers. Today you are thrivers. You’ve gone a great journey; you’ve done well; your home is beautiful. We stand shoulder to shoulder with you ... to care for you and help raise your children. God bless you.”