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J.J. Kapur Wins the ACLU of Iowa's Mannheimer Youth Advocacy Award

Des Moines, Iowa – When Jeevanjot “J.J.” Kapur (pronounced ka-PUR) was two years old, he thought he saw his father on television. It was actually Osama bin Laden.

It was a turning point for the family, who realized how deeply ignorance and misconceptions of their Sikh faith could run. And for J.J., now 17, it was the start of a mission to educate Iowans and others about Sikhism and to advocate for religious understanding of many types.

Because of his success and commitment in conveying that message, the ACLU of Iowa has named him as the recipient of the 2017 Robert Mannheimer Youth Advocacy Award.

One of the first points he makes when teaching others about Sikhism is that it is not Islam – the two are completely different religions.

Like his father and other Sikh men, J.J. wears a turban. Sikhs wear turbans and do not cut their long hair in reverence to their ancestors, J.J. says. While most Americans who wear turbans are Sikh, J.J. also helps Iowans understand that turbans worldwide are worn by men and women of many different cultures. Only in some cases do they also have religious significance.

Turning Ignorance Into Understanding

Though ignorance and prejudice is widespread, the turban has become for too many people a symbol of terrorism. When J.J.'s family was at a restaurant a few years ago, a group of teenagers snickered at them. Eventually, one of them spoke up, telling J.J.'s father to “go home, Osama.”

Turning a negative experience into a positive one, two years ago he founded the Iowa Sikh Turbanators, a youth service group that aims to amplify the voice and profile of Sikhs in Des Moines.

At its first event, the Turbanators packed 44,000 meals for Meals from the Heartland. Earlier this year, they hosted an Evening of Enlightenment at the Sikh temple in West Des Moines to help non-Sikhs better understand the Sikh faith, which is often confused with Islam.

J.J. is also a frequent public speaker for panels, forums, and community groups. He sometimes even includes a Bollywood dance as a way to honor his heritage and grab the audience's attention.

J.J. has told his community's story to rack up a series of impressive forensics wins. His speech, "Let's Dance," starts out with a Bollywood dance and focuses on his experiences as a Sikh American. He recently earned first place in original oratory at the National Speech and Debate Tournament last month. He's also won the National Tournament of Champions, Harvard University, and Emory University speech competitions.

"In response to the discrimination our religious community experienced after 9/11, I tried to flip the script, to turn the destructive narratives about Sikhism on their heads so that Americans could see the reality that they obscure," J.J. says.

The incident at the restaurant was painful, but it is gratifying for J.J. to see, in stark contrast, the positive community reaction when the Turbanators do outreach. At the Evening of Enlightenment, "As I poured hot tea for our Des Moines community members after the event, I remember seeing something on their faces: not fear, hatred, or mistrust – but friendliness and understanding."

Other Winners Honored

The Robert Mannheimer award is named in memory of the Des Moines attorney and ACLU supporter. It recognizes a remarkable young person in Iowa ages 14 to 19 who has advocated for civil liberties in some way. The winner is given a \$500 cash prize. For more information, go to www.aclu-ia.org.

A second-place award goes to Robert Nishimwe of North High School. An African-American, Robert is enrolled at Central Academy and was concerned about the lack of diversity in his classes at Central. As a result, he started an advocacy group, Communities of Racial Equality (CORE), which was already at Roosevelt High, at North High. Among other activities, CORE held a post-election rally that brought together dozens of community groups to affirm their commitment to diversity.

A third-place award goes to Arthur Hanson of Nevada High School, a transgender high school student who founded his middle school Gay-Straight Alliance. Arthur was also key in organizing a Trans101 Conference at his high school.

Recognition at the ACLU of Iowa Bill of Rights Brunch

J.J. and the other recipients will receive their awards at the ACLU of Iowa Bill of Rights Brunch Saturday, Sept. 23, from 10:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Des Moines Botanical Garden. More information can be found at www.aclu-ia.org.

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The ACLU of Iowa is a private, non-partisan organization that fights to advance civil liberties for all. It is the state affiliate of the national American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU prides itself in upholding everyone's civil liberties, no matter who they are or what they believe. We work to assure the rights of all Iowans – from atheists to devout Christians, from labor unions to businesspeople and more – to make sure the constitutional rights of all are preserved. For more information, please go to www.aclu-ia.org.

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