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A PASSION *for* JUSTICE

BY CAHIR O'DOHERTY

The recent brutal attack on an innocent Sikh man in Richmond Hill was proof, if it's needed, that anti-immigrant racism is still a potent force in Queens. Cross cultural confrontations still arise with alarming frequency here and after the heartfelt denunciations and condemnations by elected officials and concerned communities, many are left wondering how to tackle the problem at its root.

The five men who attacked Rajinder Singh Khalsa, 54, were under the mistaken impression that he was a Muslim. As they pummeled him they mocked his turban and they made references to the terrorist attacks of 9/11; they did not know or care that he had won several awards for community service, they were not aware that he had helped to organize a blood drive in the aftermath of September 11. It's the kind of irony that underlines the ignorance at the heart of most bias crimes.

Bryan Pu-Folkes, the executive director of New York New Immigrant Community Empowerment, knows what it feels like to be on the receiving end of erroneous cultural assumptions. He puts it simply: "Diversity without understanding equals chaos." To counteract this kind of chaos he established NICE in 1999. The organization is a cross-cultural, grass-roots venture that uses advocacy and public education to ensure that new immigrants are influential in civic, govern-

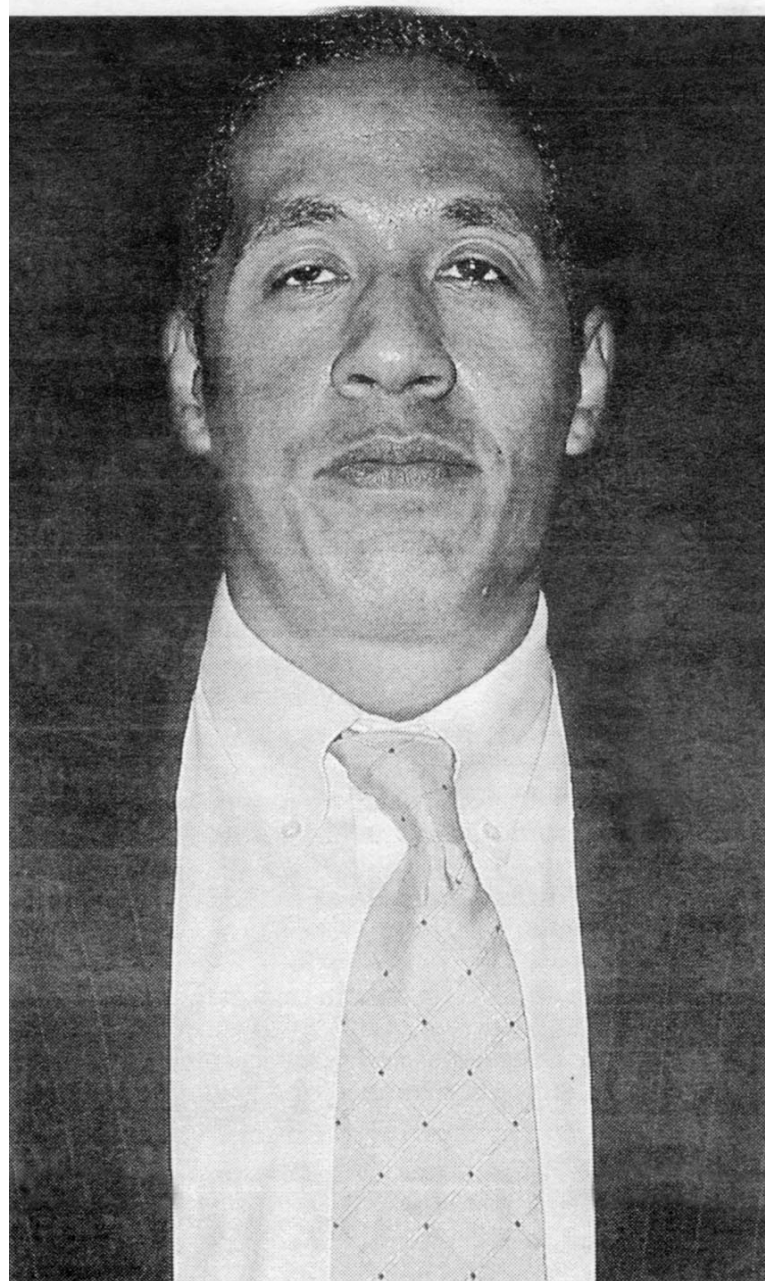
mental and public affairs. "We ensure that immigrants have access to the services that they need and deserve," says Pu-Folkes:

NICE grew out of a campaign to reject the anti-immigrant rhetoric that appeared on billboards in Queens and across the country funded by groups such as Project USA. Realizing that they were being scapegoated, immigrant communities in Jackson Heights immediately organized a subway poster campaign to counter Project USA's divisive messages, using facts about the contributions of immigrant communities and creating a coalition of persons from different backgrounds and experiences who were united by a desire to improve immigrant communities.

"My parents were both immigrants; my mother came from Burma and my father came from the West Indies and they both arrived here in 1959. They met in Washington at College, where they were part of an international club. They had common interests; my

mother was studying music – she sings opera – and my dad was studying English and psychology. He helped her to improve her English and a relationship developed between them. What was striking to me was that they began their relationship in 1959, defying conventional wisdom, because theirs was a taboo interracial relationship in the midst of the civil rights era. My mother in particular had to endure a lot of social and familial pressure. They sometimes couldn't eat at the same restaurant, for example. Finding shared housing was also an issue. But the affection and love they had for each other transcended all those barriers."

His parents' tenacity and love in the face of so much bias provided Pu-Folkes with the kind of inspirational life lesson that has helped to make him who he is. His commitment to social justice is palpable and has an almost visceral disdain for the kind of political – and often physical – attacks that are made



THE QUEENS COURIER/photo by Cahir O'Doherty

Bryan Pu-Folkes, the Executive Director of Jackson Heights New Immigrant Community Empowerment, has made a firm commitment to social justice for immigrant communities.

on vulnerable immigrant communities in Queens. Working first as the personal intern, then as a staff member at Alan Hevesi's district office, Pu-Folkes learned about the legislative process, drafted bills, sat on the floor of the assembly and heard debates. It was an eye opener; he was getting a first class lesson in civic engagement. "I realized when these constituents research an issue, when they organize their neighbors, when they're vocal and present their arguments and they know the resources that are available to them politicians have to respond."

The civic process, Pu-Folkes affirms, should not be limited

to just the wealthy and the influential. In recognition of this, NICE sponsors conferences to inform immigrant communities on their rights and how to access neighborhood and other services and resources; they also sponsor workshops, training seminars, and community-led projects to educate new immigrant communities on issues such as voter education and civic participation.

"We have the knowledge and we help immigrant communities gain access to that knowledge. When our communities are healthier and stronger our democracy is strengthened and we all benefit."