

Eboo Patel Is A Man of Interfaith

By Manya A. Brachear

Eboo Patel's earliest opportunity to find common ground with people of other faiths involved hot dogs.

Embarrassed at age 6 that he had to haul halal hot dogs to a friend's party, he sneaked into the kitchen to hand his kosher franks to the hostess. There, he discovered the Jewish kids doing the same.

That would be the first of many interfaith encounters for Patel, 34, the founder of Chicago's Interfaith Youth Core and a front man for the Obama administration's renewed focus on interfaith relations.

On Friday morning, he will become the first Muslim to deliver the keynote address in the 46-year history of the Greater Chicago Leadership Breakfast, the day after he received the 2010 Louisville Grawemeyer Award, the most lucrative prize for a single work in the field of religion.

Selected from 67 nominations worldwide, Patel won the prize for his 2007 autobiography, "Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation."

"In America, a lot of people say religion should only be private and you shouldn't talk about it," he said in an interview. "[As a result], people who seek positive cooperative relationships from different backgrounds forfeit the territory to those who seek divisive relationships between different religions."

Patel recalls the day President Barack Obama stood before more than two dozen religious leaders in the Oval Office and issued marching orders for a new and improved faith-based initiative. What stands out in Patel's mind is the emphasis the president placed on interfaith relations.

"I didn't have to advocate for it. I just had to listen," said Patel, who serves on the council of religious and secular leaders who advise the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. "President Obama has been eloquent on the issue of in-



Eboo Patel, left, Joshua DuBois, the Muslim and Pentecostal leaders for President Barack Obama's faith-based initiative, tour Gads Hill Center in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. Patel will be the first Muslim keynote speaker at the Greater Chicago Leadership Breakfast.

terfaith cooperation and how religious communities have to build up bridges that benefit the common good."

The faith-based effort fulfills a promise. On the campaign trail, Obama pledged to extend the faith-based initiative started by former President George W. Bush to help social service programs run by religious and other charitable groups obtain federal grants and contracts.

Since February, Patel and the other 24 members of the council have played a much broader role, providing personal spiritual counsel to the president, drafting recommendations and working in support of the department's four goals: fostering economic recovery, reducing abortions, encouraging responsible fatherhood and improving interfaith relations.

The council appointment elevated Patel's mission to a world stage because the first three goals require a level of interfaith cooperation.

Patel was born in Mumbai, India, but raised in the western suburb of Glen Ellyn. His posse at Glenbard South High School included a Cuban Jew, an Indian

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Hindu, a Nigerian evangelical, a Roman Catholic, a Latter-day Saint and a Lutheran. Though Patel's family did not always make it to Friday prayers at the mosque, "the ethos of Islam was always in the air," he said.

Patel attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign at the height of a national conversation about diversity. Yet religion was notably absent from the discussion, he said. It came up more often in evening news reports about escalating violence around the world. He wanted to "make interfaith cooperation the same kind of ideal as we make interracial harmony," Patel said.

With that in mind, he harnessed the energy and idealism of half a dozen contemporaries. Together, they set out to deliver a series of interfaith conferences and stop people their age from "fighting, killing and dying to the soundtrack of prayer."

"If [religion] is going to be a bridge of cooperation, we need to inspire and train a generation of interfaith bridge-builders," Patel said.

In October 1998, after a trip to India that included meeting with the Dalai Lama, he left for Oxford University on a Rhodes scholarship. By the time he returned to the U.S. four years later, the national conversation had shifted.

Today, the Interfaith Youth Core is a \$4 million organization with a staff of 30 and a presence on six continents. They expect to train 25,000 interfaith leaders and set up shop on 500 college campuses in the next five years.

That progress is why Patel won the \$200,000 prize, said Susan Garrett, coordinator of the Grawemeyer Award in Religion, given annually by the University of Louisville and the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary to support promising ideas in the humanities.

Robert Black, president of the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, which sponsors the prayer breakfast, said Patel was an obvious choice as the first Muslim to deliver the keynote address. Last year's breakfast featured a rabbi — the first non-Christian speaker in 45 years.

"This is an 'anything is possible moment' we live in," Patel said. "Really bad things are possible, and really good things are possible. The question I ask myself is: What am I doing to help make the good things more likely?"