



Frank Islam receives interfaith leadership honor

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Entrepreneur and philanthropist Frank Islam was recently presented with the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, DC's International Leadership Award for 'his support of interfaith dialogue and education through the Athenaeum Symposium at Montgomery College as well as his many contributions to the arts and higher education in the DC area and around the world.'

Islam, who had immigrated to the United States as a teenager and is a self-made multimillionaire, received the award from Maryland State Senator Jamie Raskin, who was recently elected to the US House of Representatives, at the IFC's 37th annual Interfaith Concert at the Metropolitan AME Church, in Northwest Washington, DC.

Islam told *India Abroad* that while he's received numerous honors, awards, and accolades over the years, "This one is so special because it comes from an organization that promotes unity in diversity and among all of the religious and faith traditions of this great country. And, for them to recognize and honor me for my efforts to promote the interfaith coming together, particularly after such a polarizing election season, means so much more than I can simply express in words."

Dr. Sambhu Banik, a longtime community activist, and like Islam, a Montgomery County resident, who was among the more than 500 guests at the event, told *India Abroad* that he swelled with pride at the honor bestowed on Islam.

"I was so very happy and delighted to see Frank Islam be the recipient of this year's highly prestigious and coveted Interfaith Leadership Award for his outstanding contributions in the educational and cultural fields as well as for his philanthropic activities in the US and around the world," he said. "It is a rare honor for all Indian Americans living in this great country, to have one of our own, and someone who has been an integral part of our community as Frank has been to receive this singular honor."

US Senator Benjamin L. Cardin, Maryland Democrat, in congratulating Islam, said, 'Frank has been a staunch supporter of causes that promote diversity, religious freedom, and interfaith dialogue and cooperation. In doing so, he contributes to the creation of a more equal and inclusive society, in keeping with the principles championed by our nation's Founding Fathers.'

In his remarks Islam expressed his 'deep gratitude' to Rabbi Gerry Serotta, executive director, IFC, 'for his interfaith leadership and for giving me this award. Let us stand shoulder to shoulder with him for the vision we share and the values we cherish, nourish, and nurture.'

He said he was accepting the award on behalf of the members of the conference and 'all those who are working diligently together to build bridges, to break down the barriers, and to promote dialogue of understanding and a shared sense of community throughout the DC area.'

'You are doing the heavy lifting required to create a more unified and just community here in the metropolitan area,' he said. 'And, I am doing what I can to help lighten your load. I see us as partners and collaborators in this interfaith endeavor.'

He said the endeavor had been made more difficult in this election year 'because of the harsh and divisive language of the campaign, in which one candidate's message separated people by race, religion, and national origin,' but added, 'the

American people have spoken through our electoral process. No doubt many of us here did not get the outcome we may have wanted, but, we will accept the result. We love our country; we will serve it, defend it, and never stop struggling.'

'We will continue to fight for the soul of our nation,' he reiterated. 'Americans of all faiths and background need to come together and redouble our efforts to reject hate and bigotry in all forms. We must continue to fight for a fairer and stronger America. We are stronger together.'

Islam said this could be done 'through our creeds, through our seeds, through our deeds,' before elaborating on each.

Explaining what he meant by 'our creeds,' he said, 'I stand before you a Muslim with the last name of Islam. Think about that. Depending on who is looking at it given conditions in the US and around the world today, it might be said

Montgomery County, Maryland — the county in which I reside. The College sponsors the Athenaeum Symposium to provide its students access to presentations by leading experts in areas such as international affairs, arts, politics, and economics. The Symposium educates, informs and helps to shape those students. It plants seeds. That is why I support it.' Two years ago, Islam had also contributed \$2 million to establish a school of management at his alma mater, the Aligarh Muslim University, and endowed a chair of innovation and entrepreneurship.

And finally, according to Islam, 'Our creeds and our seeds lead to our deeds.'

'Let me begin talking about our deeds by taking you back to India once again,' he said. 'In India, my family lived in a small town called Azamgarh. It was there that my parents

taught me to treat people in the way that you want to be treated. Give dignity and respect to others. Do what you can to serve your community. In the neighborhood where I grew up, all of us from different backgrounds and different faiths learned to work side-by-side because we were bound together in the service of others. I have carried that collaborative and communal approach developed during my formative years to my business, philanthropic and civic involvement.'

He spoke about his work as part of the advisory board of the US Institute of Peace — an organization devoted to the nonviolent prevention and mitigation of deadly conflict around the world. And then invoking Mahatma Gandhi, said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world.' I try to live my life in accordance with Gandhi's advice and to practice what I preach.'

Created in 1978, the IFC brings together 11 historic faith communities 'to promote dialogue, understanding and a sense of community and to work cooperatively for social and economic justice through the DC region.'

IFC member faiths currently include the Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Latter-day Saints, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sikh and Zoroastrian

communities.

IFC president, Imam Talib Shareed, in his welcoming remarks, said the concert had 'special meaning as an opportunity to heal divisions in the society after the election.'

Shareed, the Imam of Masjid Muhammad, the Nation's Mosque, and a retired Air Force Master Sergeant, said, 'Having this concert in the church where Frederick Douglas prayed near the White House and during the inaugural year of the African American History museum makes an important public statement of the commitment of our 11 historic faiths to reconciliation and healing.'

This year's concert calls to prayer from different traditions as well as performers from the Metropolitan AME Cathedral Choir, Avesta Performers of DC, Zoroastrian Association, Cambodian Buddhist Dancers, Metropolitan Washington Baha'i Chorale, and the Mosaic Harmony Multifaith Chorus.

Proceeds of the concert were to support the IFC's community work 'fostering understanding and collaboration among local religious institutions for the common good as well as religious literacy programs year-round.'

Senator Cardin showered kudos on IFC, saying, 'By bringing the community together in this way, you are helping to promote greater understanding and tolerance in our community... Our society is made stronger through each of our distinct communities and religious perspectives.'



Frank Islam, left, at the event.

that I am either doubly blessed or doubly cursed.'

But, he argued, that he felt doubly blessed because, 'I grew up in a religious family in India (he was born in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh). Being a Muslim has taught me many things — but the most important is that the whole purpose of religion is to provide justice and a path to justice for all of us. I have learned as a Muslim to believe in the unity of all creation and that everything and everyone is a reflection of God on earth. Because of that I have also learned that there are just people and that just people do just things.'

'I treasure my faith. My faith firmly believes in equality, dignity, compassion, respect, tolerance, justice and peace for other faiths. My faith keeps me calm and provides me with a sense of optimism that gives me peace. With my personal peace, I can work with others of different faiths and different creeds for peace and to build stronger communities.'

Islam said it was joy to do 'god's work' with representatives of 11 historic faith communities — 'not the work of your God or the work of my God, but the work of our God; our God as members of the same universal spiritual family.'

Then moving from creeds to 'our seeds,' Islam noted, 'One of the reasons the Interfaith Conference gave me its Leadership Award is for my support of the Athenaeum Symposium at Montgomery College...'

'Montgomery College is a community college located in