

# A student-led initiative

The history of the Scottsville Carbis Road Jamaat Khana/Islamic centre

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IN 1984, I started my Bachelor of Arts/ Law degree at the University of Natal, now KZN, Pietermaritzburg campus. At the time there were very few Muslim students due to the apartheid regulations which designated that students had to attend universities based on their race.

The rules were just starting to be relaxed, which is why some Muslim students were able to enrol at what had been a whites-only university.

On arrival at the university we found the Muslim Students Association (MSA) already in operation. It was led by committed Muslim students who were active in promoting the cause of Muslim stu-

dents in an environment that was not well versed in religious diversity.

One of the most fundamental needs of Muslim students was to find a venue for the weekly Friday prayer. On our first Friday prayer experience we found that the MSA had secured a room in the university which also housed the Student Representatives Council (SRC) offices, the canteen, the main hall for events and the radio station. While this arrangement did allow us to perform the Friday prayer it was less than ideal in terms of the nature of the vicinity. At that stage we were still very few. After representations by the MSA we were given a venue close to the drama faculty which consisted of a small room which proved to be more peaceful than the previous venue.

At this stage we as Muslim students also appreciated the great willingness of the university authorities and the SRC to try to accommodate our needs as a registered student association.

As the years progressed, the number of Muslim students started to grow exponentially. Further, our senior leaders were now going to be leaving the university which resulted in discussions on finding a new group of students to lead the MSA. In 1986, I was elected to lead the MSA together with a highly committed committee, which proved to be one of the most educational periods of my university life.

One of my first aims was to establish an Islamic centre/Jamaat Khana for Muslim students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal that could be called home. One of the ideas explored was to buy a house which could be used as a Jamaat Khana. To implement this ambitious idea we had to raise substantial funds from the community.

We also had to seek the advice of community lawyers, accountants and Imams. In addition, we had to find a Muslim who was

designated "white", who would be willing to undertake such a project during the time of the Group Areas Act, which limited the sale of property to people of the "white" race group in designated areas.

However, most importantly, as it was a student-led project, we had to garner the support of fellow Muslim students.

Ultimately, the successful realisation of the dream was dependent on the vision that it was a project that catered for a few at the time but required the vision to see that in the future it would cater for many. As you can imagine, this was not an easy task in the late 1980s, during the dark days of apartheid.

Armed with faith and vision, the plan began to unfold with a property being identified at 15b Carbis Road in Scottsville, which was in the immediate vicinity of the university.

The MSA executive committee then formed a working group with prominent members of the Muslim community. Golam Moosa from Willowton Oil agreed to support the project financially, while the remainder of the funds were to be raised. This involved us walking the streets and visiting individual members of the community at their places of business in Church and Retief streets.

Under the guidance of our accountant Ahmed Saeed Mulla, we were able to manage the financial aspects, and with the assistance of our lawyer Faisal Mulla, we were able to take care of the legal issues. Of great importance was to get the blessing of a prominent Imam, and in this respect Moulana Murchie recognised the vision of the project and the benefit to the present and future Muslim community in the area.

To purchase a property, the Pietermaritzburg University Jamaat

Khana (Pty) Ltd was created, with Dr Abdus Samad Miller, a French lecturer at the university, agreeing to be the so-called "white" nominee of the company.

Once all the important role-players had agreed to the plan, everything proceeded smoothly and the property at 15b Carbis Road was purchased in 1989 for R102 000.

On the evening of the opening of the Jumaat Khana/Islamic centre, the local community in the Carbis Road area threatened to call the police to prevent the house from being used as an Islamic centre and house of prayer. However, this action failed as the matter had been thoroughly researched and planned, and all the legal aspects considered. The opening was an enormously satisfying event for all the role-players. It is noteworthy that July 7, 2020, marked 70 years since the Group Areas Act was passed. It was officially repealed on June 30, 1991, by the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act.

Many people contributed to the creation and the continued success of this project, whose names and faces I have not mentioned or remembered, but many of whom are local visionaries and heroes of the great city and people of Pietermaritzburg and alumni of the university, and leaders and members of the Muslim Student Association.

This small contribution is testimony to their actions which are often forgotten in an era where there were no cellphones or Facebook to capture all the moments that make life meaningful.

In many ways, my life as a South African diplomat was shaped and guided by my experiences at the University of Natal through the exchange and tolerance of diverse views and the creation of an Islamic centre that reflects the values and ethos that give effect to the Qu-

ranic verse that is so relevant today, namely: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other)."

Through 15b Carbis Road we undertook to serve our fellow students and the broader Pietermaritzburg community.

In time, the Jumaat Khana in Carbis Road become a centre of learning, a place to promote gender equality and women's rights, a place to house cultural exhibitions, a counselling centre, a social centre, a place of meditation and prayer, a place to plan demonstrations against apartheid and to undertake humanitarian missions, and a place to break the fast during Ramadan.

The message conveyed through the Jamaat Khana to the university, the broader community of Pietermaritzburg and the congregation, was that the Muslim Students Association is a society that is dedicated to a future in which all are equal and in which a person's character and not race, religion or gender is the determining factor.

It started to represent a new South Africa, even before the Rainbow Nation was born, and served as an example that we all share a common humanity.

At the Carbis Road Jumaat Khana many of us found our true spiritual home. Today, the Jumaat Khana consists of the said property together with three other plots that were thereafter consolidated with the original property. The total area is now 3 151 square metres.

The Jumaat Khana now serves over 200 families from the surrounding areas and is managed by a new generation of individuals under the Scottsville Muslim Society, some of whom also studied at the prestigious university

The hope is that all who pray, visit and reside at the Jumaat Khana in Carbis Road continue to find a special spiritual place there too.

“Armed with faith and vision, the plan began to unfold ...”

- Advocate Mohamed Cassimjee is Minister Plenipotentiary at the South African Embassy in Berlin.