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Muslim Students hold "A Gathering Against Hate"

The Muslim Student Association (MSA) held a demonstration of solidarity on Tuesday, Nov. 10 at 6 p.m. after a threat found on a bathroom wall last Monday. The threat stated, "I will be here 11/11/2015 to kill all muslims (sic)."

In an era of activism and social justice, this event echoed the same spirit of support and tolerance for people of all religions. Approximately 1,000 students, administrators and community members gathered outside War Memorial Chapel on the Drillfield for "Standing in Solidarity: A Gathering Against Hate."

The event began with Arabic and English recitations of the Quran. MSA President and senior civil engineering major Obaid Khan followed with opening remarks. Devon Lee, a Ph.D. student in Africana studies and advisor for the Virginia Tech NAACP, emphasized diversity and cited past discrimination.

"I really like the emphasis that several speakers, including the president, placed on learning about people with different lived experiences," said Frank Shushok, senior associate vice president for student affairs. "Developing true relationship and friendship across different lived experiences is a very tangible way for people to move forward and something that everyone can do — today, tomorrow — to help advance InclusiveVT, which is developing relationships and friendships across difference."

Preparation began last Thursday. In less than a week, MSA organized an event with full support from the community, including President Timothy Sands.

"Frankly, I'm not surprised. When we've had challenges to our community, when people in our community feel threatened, Hokies show up," Sands said. "It's just something that we do; we do it because we have experienced what it means to be a strong community and what we can learn from it, and we know that we need to be there to support each other."

Students, administration and all who attended witnessed the strength and dedication of the Hokie community.

"There have been so many times that I've been here that I've seen the Hokie community come together, and it just reinforced the love and resilience that we really are a Hokie family," said Sharrika Adams, associate dean of students and director of student advocacy.

Students of all backgrounds unified with a single goal: to express solidarity and support for their fellow Muslim brothers and sisters at Virginia Tech.

"This kind of stuff is what breaks down the community, so we wanted to come out and see how we can help rebuild that sense after it's been tarnished by the graffiti that some idiot decided to put up," said Ashley Baboota, a senior hotel and hospitality tourism management major.

The event was held on Nov. 10, a day prior to the day specified in the threat. The idea for the gathering was not intended as a direct response, but presented an opportunity to learn.

“There was a lot of minority groups there as well, but it was nice to see a nice representation of everyone come out and help support, and going forward, being more aware of some of the things they talked about up there just helped put it in perspective, like different people stories, especially hearing people who might not be going to classes tomorrow and how that affects their experience,” Baboota said.

MSA President and Senior Civil Engineering Major Obaid Khan delivered the opening remarks.

“This is just the first step: we're all coming together, we're all showing that differences won't divide us, but they strengthen us and we are one family,” Khan said. “The fact that this is how we all respond is something that really touches my heart and gives me a lot of hope.”

Members of MSA and the university community had confidence and commitment in the continuation of the movement of solidarity and inclusivity.

“I hope that we continue to stay in the conversation, that we continue to stay in community, that we continue to stand together, that we continue to stay in the struggle, knowing that the only way to become as inclusive as we want to be, is to be in community with each other,” said Patty Perillo, vice president for student affairs. “I think it reminds people that community is powerful and that when we come together and stand for an important cause, we can rise above hatred, we can rise above pain, we can rise above threats.”

After the closing remarks by Khan, he asked those in attendance to come together and sign a banner in a demonstration of support for the Muslim community.

“I think it shows that this is a very special place. I have heard from students, I have heard from faculty, I have heard from the administration that there's something special happening here, and I've now been here eight weeks,” said Tracy Vosburgh, senior associate vice president for university relations who joined the Hokie community earlier this year. “You feel it, and when you come to an event like this, you know, this is a pretty special place.”

Both the size and diversity of attendees inspired members of MSA, and provided a sense of safety and security for some, even on their own campus.

“The quick response was really amazing actually, and it was nice to get this amount of response, this amount of people to stand with us and understand how it might feel to get this type of threat and then try to be singled out of a community you've always felt a part of,” said Mehak Khokhar, a senior biology major and member of MSA.

The speakers explained hate as ignorance and encouraged interaction with other people as the solution.

"It gives me hope: hope that there is room for change and hope that we can actually come together, not only in times of mourning, but in times of action," said Fawad Mohammad, a senior civil engineering major and vice president of MSA. "Seeing this and seeing the outcome and seeing the students who came out in the cold, it makes me happy that we are all one nation and one family."

The crowd was comprised of diverse identities, all members of the Hokie community. "I think it's really important to be here to show support," said Sarah Busch, a sophomore civil and environmental engineering major. "We're all Hokies, regardless of religion, ethnicity, race and we need to stand up for what we believe in."

Not all students who believed in the movement were able to attend. Despite absences, the crowd was sizeable, and stood unified and unbreakable, representing a community with the potential and commitment to change.

"Even though we are the targets, there are other groups out there, people in particular too, that come from different backgrounds," Khokar said. "I think going forward means that we all stand together, accept our differences and just learn to make this world a better place."

The story on the original threat: [Graffiti threatens Muslim students at Virginia Tech](#)

