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09/21/2006

## Sikhs join Dem committee for first time in Qns. history

By Stephen Stirling

**Leaders of the Queens Sikh community came together at Borough Hall Tuesday to announce that for the first time in city history five Sikhs had been elected to public office.**

Harjinder Singh Duggal, Dhan Singh, Gurmej Singh, Mohinder Singh and Harpreet Singh Wahan, who represent the communities of Flushing, Richmond Hill and Ozone Park, were all elected to the Queens Democratic County Committee in last week's Democratic primary.

Amardeep Singh, the legal director of the Sikh Coalition in Richmond Hill, said this is an important step toward changing the ways people view their community. Singh said that since Sept. 11, the Sikh community has been unfairly lumped in with Muslim extremists such as the Taliban, largely because of their similar outward appearance typified by long beards and turbans.

"After Sept. 11, we really had no choice but to get involved," Singh said. "Since Sept. 11, Sikhs have lived in constant fear of hate crimes and discrimination. Sikhs have been branded as terrorists because we wear turbans. The election of Sikhs in New York signals a new era where Sikhs can pro-actively raise awareness and fight prejudice with our political clout."

Members of the Queens County Democratic Committee are representative of individual election districts, usually comprised of 750 to 1,000 registered voters. The Queens County Democratic Committee members endorse candidates, design campaigns and adopt platforms for the Democratic Party of Queens.

Since 2001, Sikhs have been the target of dozens of hate crimes around the city, according to the Sikh Coalition. In one of those most infamous incidents, Richmond Hill resident Rajinder Singh Khalsa was beaten unconscious by a group of young men while they shouted racial slurs at him. Khalsa was on hand at Borough Hall to lend his support to the newly elected officials and said he hopes this will lead to a firmer understanding of his religion and its people.

Harjinder Singh Duggal, one of the five elected to the Queens Democratic Committee, said that he and the other elected Sikhs were "breaking the ice" on Sikh involvement in politics.

"New York City is home to 55,000 Sikhs. Worldwide there are 25 million Sikhs. We have the fifth largest religion in the world, yet Sikhs remain misunderstood and are targets of discrimination because of the way we look and the clothes we wear," Duggal said.

The newly elected officials pledged to serve the city to the best of their ability and stressed that they respect all religions of the world, but they want to educate those who have misconceptions about their own.

"Sikh is a proud religion. People should know that we are not Muslim, we are not Arabic, we are not terrorists. We oppose terrorism with the core of our hearts," said Mohinder Singh, another newly elected committee member. "We want to work with the people. We are all as one. We are all American."

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