

Harlem Hate Crime Victim: I'm Feeling Gratitude by Prabhjot Singh

People keep asking me what it feels like to have been assaulted in a hate crime. Honestly, I can't come up with a better response than simply "gratitude."

I'm thankful for a few reasons. If they had attacked me any more violently, I may not be awake right now to tell my story. If they had attacked me even half an hour earlier, they would have harmed my wife and one-year-old son. And if they had attacked me anywhere else, I may not have had bystanders there to save me.

I recall my assailants shouting slurs like "Osama" and "terrorist" before grabbing my beard. My most vivid and unexpected memory actually occurred after I was punched and thrown to the ground. I remember lying on the ground, waiting for their kicks and punches to stop.

Yes, it is true that my assailants fractured my jaw and dislodged some of my teeth while shouting slurs at me. Yet, I understand that it could have been much worse. I am a resident physician in East Harlem, Manhattan, and I've seen the kind of damage people can inflict when inspired by hate. So I consider myself to be extremely fortunate.

People keep asking me if we're going to leave our neighborhood. My wife and I have no intention to move. We have loved spending the last few years in this vibrant and friendly area, and our experiences here have been largely positive. We love serving this community, and we have specifically structured our professional careers around helping our neighbors access health care. My wife just launched City Health Works, a nonprofit venture that helps cultivate health workers and improve the health of the Harlem community. I am also a doctor in this neighborhood and a professor at Columbia University, and my primary focus is to help provide health care for underserved communities.

Even more important to me than my attackers being caught is that they are taught. My tradition teaches me to value justice and accountability, and it also teaches me love, compassion and understanding. It's a tough situation. I care about the people in my local community. I want the streets to be safe for my young son, but at the same time, I am not comfortable with the idea of putting more young teenagers from my neighborhood on the fast track to incarceration. This incident, while unfortunate, can help initiate a local conversation to create greater understanding within the community.

My wife and I plan to raise our son in this same Harlem neighborhood, and I can't help but see the kids who assaulted me as somehow linked to him. In a hostile world, could he too be driven to such action? Could he too feel such hate?

My hope is no. My hope is that our family continues to be a part of this neighborhood,

from visiting parks and playgrounds to building relationships through our work. I believe this will bring about positive change that strengthens us through our diversity.

One day my son may choose to continue practicing the Sikh faith as an adult. My hope is that our neighborhood and all neighborhoods across America will support him, no matter his path.

So today, my response is gratitude. Tomorrow my response will be gratitude, as well. To the nurse, to the elderly man and to the other good Samaritans who came to my aid; to my Harlem community, my Columbia community and my Sikh community; and for my role as husband, father, doctor, American, teacher, advocate and neighbor.

This gratitude enables my wife and I to remain optimistic that our son will never have to go through what I just experienced.