

Sunhak Peace Prize winner Dr. Sakena Yacoobi speaks in Birmingham, UK

David and Patricia Earle
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Birmingham, United Kingdom -- A diverse audience of several hundred squeezed into a private home to hear a message of hope from Sunhak Peace Prize winner Dr. Sakena Yacoobi.

The idea for the visit originated in January 2018 in Dakar, Senegal, where David Earle, the leader of the Birmingham chapter of UPF with his wife, Patricia, was attending the Africa Summit hosted jointly by UPF and President Macky Sall's government. During a breakfast conversation with Dr. Yacoobi, who was awarded the 2017 Sunhak Peace Prize for her work educating Afghan women and girls, David discovered she was scheduled to take part in a conference in Oxford in April. He asked her if she would consider coming up to Birmingham to speak about her life and work.

Things worked out nicely, and she arrived in Birmingham on Saturday, April 14. That evening she spoke informally with a small number of local UPF members. On Sunday morning she was interviewed by the Unity FM radio station. Then, on Sunday afternoon and Sunday evening in the Earles' home, she gave two public talks, which were co-sponsored by the Birmingham chapters of UPF and the Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), an affiliated organization.

Approximately 100 people attended each of the public talks, representing a very broad spectrum of the interreligious and multicultural society of England's West Midlands region. There were representatives from Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Council of Faiths; Amnesty International; Clifton Road mosque community; Guru Nanak Nishkam community; Arya Samaj; the Indian Ladies Club; Somali, Iranian, Gambian, and Pakistani organizations; Unity FM radio; the Federation of Indian Muslim Organizations, and several other NGOs.

Of course, a number of Afghans living in Birmingham attended, having come to our city as refugees. One of these Afghan residents, Mariam, worked as a secretary to Dr. Yacoobi in Pakistan about 20 years ago! Also present was Elisabeth Appleyard, who works for Creating Hope International, of which Dr. Yacoobi's Afghan Institute of Learning is an integral part; it was wonderful that they could meet and talk.

From her talks given over two days, we learned from Dr. Yacoobi about her time as a child, growing up in an Afghanistan which was relatively peaceful, and with a father who always stressed to her the importance of education.

As political tensions during the 1970s, and then Soviet occupation, plunged the country into conflict and bloodshed, her parents sent her to the United States. There she continued her education, gained important academic qualifications, and then worked incredibly hard to bring her family to safety.

Having achieved this, a compelling inner calling then motivated her to place her life entirely in God's hands. She returned to her native country, via Pakistan, in order to help women and children caught in a life-and-death daily existence. By this time, Soviet forces had left Afghanistan, and there was an increasing presence of Islamic fundamentalism.



Against this backdrop, Dr. Yacoobi worked quietly, step by step, going into communities to establish small centers for education and, crucially, training as teachers those people she felt she could trust -- who possessed not only an aptitude for teaching but also a parental heart of caring for the education and entire well-being of children. This noble concept was a key ingredient for success.

Starting with one person, a mullah, she has expanded her staff to around 1,000, in the process establishing schools, orphanages, and even a hospital -- touching and improving the lives of more than 14 million people, mainly children.

During the time for questions and answers, Dr. Yacoobi was asked the inevitable. "What about security?" "How could you do this under the nose of the Taliban?" "What are your views on the political situation?" "How do you fund your endeavors?" and, of course, "What motivated you, and still motivates you, to keep going?" The central theme to all her answers was her love for God and her love for people, most of all children.

During the public talks, donation boxes were passed around, and through everyone's generosity around 600 British pounds (over 812 U.S. dollars) were raised for her worthy cause -- "holy money" from our audiences' many faith and cultural traditions! Normally receiving honoraria for her talks, as well as online donations, she had never seen money raised in such a way and was excitedly fascinated by our method of fundraising.

Informal conversations continued on into the evening, until Dr. Yacoobi finally "collapsed," happily, having given her all, reflecting the way she lives her life. We are sure she will return one day, the one who has touched so many lives herself having been touched by our collective heart and spirit. We look forward to that, and everyone promised to keep her in their prayers until we meet again.