

DR. WHO?

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT MUHAMMAD BABAR, MD

Aaron Burch

Muhammad Babar, MD, MBA is Pakistan-born, a husband and father to twin boys and a physician of Geriatric Medicine. But, like many others, he is living a life filled with unexpected responsibilities.

In recent years, Dr. Babar has added more titles to his CV. Some were unanticipated but none unwelcome, as he has become a spokesperson for compassion and inter-faith community building in Louisville.

Today, Dr. Babar serves as president of the Muslim Americans for Compassion, but he has also acted as past-president of the Association of Physicians of Pakistani Descent of Kentucky and Indiana (APPKI), and as a board member of the Center for Interfaith Relations, the Fund for the Arts, Louisville Public Media, the Speed Art Museum and more.

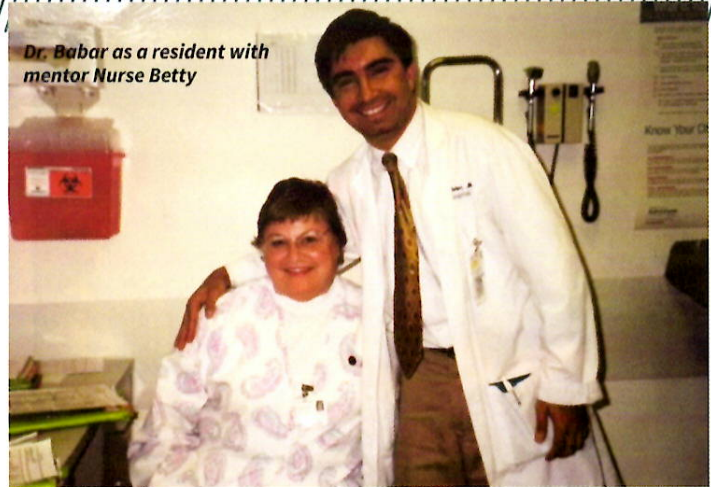
“As a physician we are supposed to be compassionate,” Dr. Babar said. “Compassion is present in every human soul. That’s all we can offer and that strength can tackle poverty, hate crimes and many other problems facing us.” Acting upon compassion has come naturally to Dr. Babar, growing from childhood experiences in Pakistan all the way to present day.

“I was born in a small city called Kharian in the state of Punjab. I was the oldest of three brothers and a sister. My father moved to Copenhagen, and I stayed in Punjab where I grew up with my grandparents,” Dr. Babar said.

“My grandmother was a religious person. My grandfather was secular and a veteran of WWII. After the war, his whole perspective changed. He would have nightmares. Years later, when I was in medical school, I realized he had PTSD.”

Growing up, Dr. Babar played cricket and field hockey with other children in the neighborhood, but his true love was reading. In the third grade, he began to read the newspaper each day and was committed to learning as much as he could about history, geography and soon, medicine.

“In a third world country, health care is not as readily available as it is here. So, growing up, I saw a great need for physicians,” he said. “Medicine is a very sacred profession. We deal with human beings, and



when you treat them, you become a part of their life story.”

To pursue his dream of practicing medicine, Dr. Babar sought a higher education at Allama Iqbal Medical College in Lahore, Pakistan, near the north-western border of India. It was a big change for the young doctor but he studied hard, graduating second in his session (class). Unfortunately, Pakistan was transforming for the worse as he studied, leading to days where even going about normal life could be terrifying.

“Islam became mandatory in schools, and soon the whole society transformed. Martial law and military ruled the country. There were more terrorist attacks in the country. As a medical student, I was always afraid of going back to my hometown, because there could have been a bomb in the bus we were traveling on. Those things became the normal in society,” he recalled.

“My grandmother was religious, and I was always a practicing Muslim. But I saw things, which had nothing to do with my religion, done in the name of that religion. That’s one thing that is still a burden on my heart.”

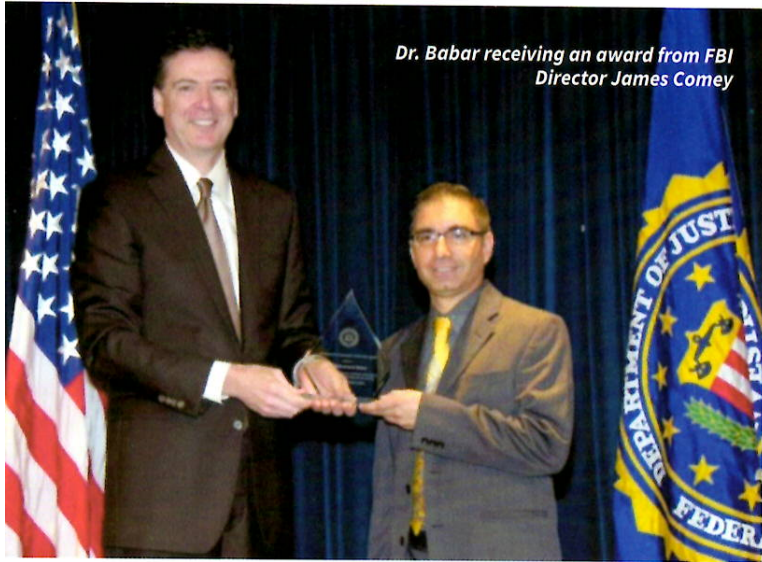
Dr. Babar was inspired to pursue medical education in the United States thanks to a professor in Pakistan, Dr. Ashfaq Ahmad Khan. “Many people from the college were doing post-graduate work in the UK because we were a British colony. But Dr. Khan was from Chicago and I was very impressed with him. I decided to go to America and applied to residency in New York near Niagara Falls.”

In 1996, Dr. Babar traveled to America for the first time and began his internal medicine residency in Buffalo, where he would spend the next seven years of his life. “I loved the city of Buffalo. I was probably the biggest fan of the Buffalo Bills and always had a passion for sports. My friends and I would go to Toronto for ethnic food and we became friends with the guards on the border. But after 9/11, travel changed for us.”

It wasn’t just travel that changed. The terrorist attacks of September 11 brought with them a new animosity and suspicion of people of the Muslim faith, even towards those who had lived in America for years. “I had to go through a security program, The National Security Entry-Exit

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Editor’s Note: Welcome to Louisville Medicine’s member spotlight section, Dr. Who? In the interest of simply getting to know each other as a society of colleagues, we’ll be highlighting random GLMS physicians on a regular basis. If you would like to recommend any GLMS physician member to the Editorial Board for this section, please e-mail aaron.burch@glms.org or 736-6338.



Dr. Babar receiving an award from FBI Director James Comey

Registration System, and have my fingerprints taken even as a young physician. We talk about profiling not being done in this country, but profiling was done. I went to register as a legal person in this country, and the officer was kind of embarrassed. He said, 'Oh doc, I don't know why you have to come here,'" Dr. Babar said.

"I have 9-year-old twin boys, and I wish I could show them the America before 9/11. That was what society should be like. We were open. We were welcoming. Even after I registered, I thought this fear was a temporary thing and shall pass. Meanwhile, I moved to Louisville and had kids. I thought, 'Man, it's not getting better, it's getting worse. Maybe I need to play my role as a citizen!'"

A friend from Pakistan, Dr. Waqar Saleem, called Dr. Babar to offer him an opening at the medical school in Louisville. Dr. Babar welcomed the opportunity, moving to the city in 2004 with his wife, Suri. The two had met in Buffalo during Dr. Babar's residency and were married in 2002.

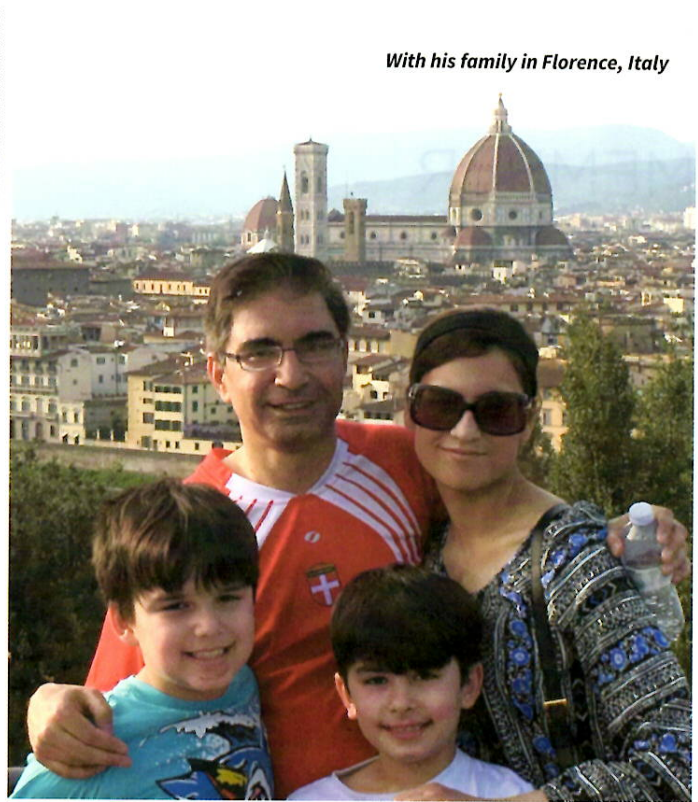
Once they arrived, Dr. Babar's work grew in countless different ways. First, he completed a fellowship in Geriatric Medicine, followed by a Master of Science Degree in Public Health. He would also complete an MBA degree online from the University of Massachusetts. He took a position at Sts. Mary & Elizabeth Hospital then began his own geriatric practice. Soon, Dr. Babar was acting medical director at several nursing and rehabilitation centers across the city.

But he hasn't let the studying distract him from the real job of helping his fellow human beings. Of that duty, he stays painfully aware.

"I still remember my first patient as a resident, a 17-year-old girl diagnosed with lymphoma. After that, when I went back to my apartment I cried like a baby. Then a few months later, I had a 35-year-old with a breast metastasis, and I hugged her mother-in-law, and we both cried. That makes this a special profession. It keeps you humble. It keeps you close to God and your fellow human beings."

The Babar family grew in 2007, as the couple's twin boys, Adam and Harris, were born. "That's when things changed for me, I'll be honest," Dr. Babar explained. "I was still happy in my little cocoon. Weekends watching football... Then I had kids, and I thought 'What kind of world is this?' We were seeing a lot of islamophobia. My family, my friends, we were trying to be invisible. How long could we live like this?"

Dr. Babar recalled seeing the tactic of dividing people through fear as



With his family in Florence, Italy

he grew up in Pakistan. Now in America, he had a horrifying sense of déjà vu. "The beauty of America is that America welcomed everybody irrespective of their faith, their ethnicity, and then those people give their best to the country. The uniqueness that America had, we've lost."

To combat the concern he felt inside, and the fear he was seeing from family and friends, Dr. Babar was called to action internally. As President of the APPKI, he guided local efforts to distribute and install 100 water purification units in Pakistan after a devastating flood in 2010. That same year, he collaborated with interfaith initiatives to provide disaster relief in Haiti following their earthquake.

"It was very humbling to see all these people step up and help. It reaffirms your faith in humanity when you send out a call and people are ready."

His community service continued as he helped plan relief after tornadoes ravaged Southern Indiana in 2012. Dr. Babar also worked to forge a collaboration between Louisville Jewish, Catholic and Muslim communities to build two houses for Habitat for Humanity.

"That was a great experience," Dr. Babar recalled. "Not only does service make you a better human being, it helps a fellow human being. And, when you're in the act of service, you understand more about the people around you in a practical way. Just through that experience, we knew more about each other's faith, traditions and backgrounds. It was humbling and very spiritual."

In the last three years, Dr. Babar has worked to establish three non-profit organizations: Muslim Americans for Compassion (to engage the community through outreach initiatives and educational events), Doctors for Healthy Communities (to help fight epidemics of addiction and childhood obesity) and a multi-ethnic engagement committee that is getting off the ground.

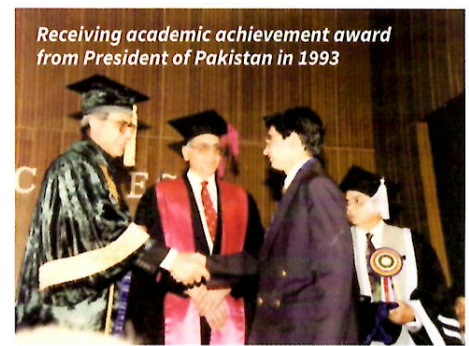
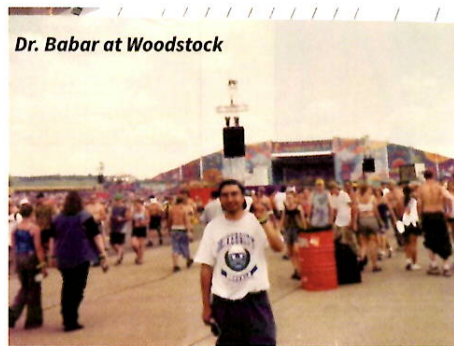
"That organization has been approved but we're still getting started. The goal is to reach immigrant communities, help them integrate into

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the mainstream community and involve them in any way we can, register them to vote and become efficient citizens," he said.

"One of my inspirations was that I see the ruthlessness of terrorist organizations and how they prey on confused and disenchanted young people. And I thought, we can't change the whole world, but in our city, we can involve the refugee youth and tell them 'You are valued.'"

Dr. Babar's efforts towards inter-community compassion have continued to bear fruit. In 2011, he was with Mayor Greg Fischer when the Mayor signed a resolution committing Louisville to the multi-year Compassionate Louisville campaign. Dr. Babar was also invited by Representative John Yarmuth to our nation's capital in 2016 to attend President Barack Obama's final State of the Union address.


Dr. Babar has seen numerous recognitions for his community service; the Doctors' Ball "Excellence in Community Service" award, Business First's Hometown Heroes award, the Jewish Community of Louisville's MOSAIC Award and the FBI Director's Community Leadership Award, just to name a few. But recognition and service don't necessarily go hand in hand.

"I was always reluctant to accept awards. I'll be honest, to this point, I still don't feel I deserve these recognitions, but I'll tell you selfishly that I have accepted them for a purpose," Dr. Babar explained. "In this day

and age, people may look at Muslims through the eyes of ISIS, through the eyes of a terrorist, and then they see Muhammad Babar standing up to accept an award...I believe that maybe this will give them an opportunity to look at my faith through my actions."

After the Orlando nightclub massacre in 2016, it was Dr. Babar who spoke at gay-friendly nightclubs in Louisville. After mosques were vandalized in recent months, Dr. Babar could be found speaking at the mosque, asking for compassion. When the "Rally to Move Forward" took place in Louisville on January 21, 2017, Dr. Babar spoke to the crowd at City Hall.

"I never thought I would be doing these things. But I believe this is my duty, to bring sanity to this world. Life is not just about raising a family and living a lavish life, it's about living for a purpose," Dr. Babar said.

"There's no contradiction for me in being a good Muslim and a good American. If you're a good human being, by default you're going to be a good Muslim. I've seen this light. I'm not complete yet. It's still a work in progress. Every day I learn more. This journey I'm on, this is the best thing." 

Aaron Burch is the communications specialist for the Greater Louisville Medical Society.