



FOOD & FELLOWSHIP

How a group of friends from Northern Virginia is keeping the faith and tackling hunger, one home-cooked meal at a time.

by Sydney Johnson | photos by Lisa Helfert



Volunteers Javed Ahmed (Iblue mask) and Tahir Rana (pink mask) hand out home-cooked meals in downtown D.C.

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Farzal Ahmed (right) and his father, Javed, assemble meals for delivery.

It's a drizzly Sunday morning in Northwest D.C. A blue 2007 Toyota Sienna pulls up to the curb along E Street, packed with hot meals, drinks and snacks.

Noting the arrival of their “Muslim brothers,” the inhabitants of the tents that line the roadway slowly emerge as four men in PPE climb out of the minivan and set up shop. The perfumed scent of curried chicken and vegetables wafts through the air.

By day's end, the men will have handed out more than 100 hot meals. It's something they do every weekend.

The weekly ritual started in October 2019, when software engineer Syed Mazhar, an Arlington father of two, originally from Bangladesh, decided he wanted to use his spare time to feed people who are homeless—a commitment that is deeply rooted in his Muslim faith.



Home-cooked curry and rice

According to the District of Columbia's most recent survey, more than 9,700 homeless individuals live on the streets of our nation's capital—two times the national average. Mazhar saw

this alarming reality as an opportunity to practice Islam's charitable teachings. He teamed up with his friend Khalifa Kanta, a full-time Uber driver from Tanzania who lives in Alexandria with his



Syed Mazhar prepares a traditional stew in his Douglas Park kitchen.



Tahir Rana distributes food to people living in tents in D.C.



Meals with a message

daughter and wife (who is expecting their second child). The two men had met at their South Arlington mosque and formed a bond. Together, they began distributing food as part of an informal effort they now call “Food for Thought.”

Before long, they were joined by Alcova Heights resident Farzal Ahmed, an IT engineer from Pakistan. Ahmed’s father, Javed, sometimes helps, too.

“Every Sunday, when I wake up, I’m so excited I don’t even worry about eating breakfast,” says Ahmed, a married father of two with twins on the way. “I’m just ready to start doing the work.”

The group has made weekly deliveries of home-cooked meals, almost without fail, for 19 months. The exception was a brief hiatus when Covid-19 first arrived in the D.C. area in March 2020. They had to pause distribution for two weeks because they didn’t have enough masks and latex gloves.

In August, Food for Thought welcomed another member—Mehdi Yese, a Crystal City limo service owner from Turkey. He was inspired by what he saw and wanted in. “Truly, [Mazhar] is sort of like an angel guy,” Yese says. “His heart is so generous, it’s incredible.”

Empathy and humanity lie at the heart of this grassroots effort. Each of the organizers wakes early on Sunday mornings and prepares his share of the day’s feast—sometimes with help from family—before meeting up at Mazhar’s Douglas Park home to package the meals, load the van and head into the city in separate cars.

One of the group’s rules is that they eat what they are serving. They would never offer a meal to others that they would not feed to their own families.

“This food that we make is really

from love,” says Mazhar, who worked in restaurants throughout college. He plans each week’s menu, prioritizing nutrition and flavor. The offerings might include rice with beans, veggies and a protein—perhaps a beef stew or chicken curry—plus snacks such as fruit, hard-boiled eggs and applesauce.

Although she isn’t involved in meal deliveries, Mazhar’s wife, Baylor Stapleton, is an integral part of the operation’s success. She wakes up every Sunday at 5 a.m. to start chopping vegetables and cooking stews in big batches before her husband joins her to assist in the kitchen.

“I’ve been the person who needs that help before,” Stapleton says, “and now I’m in a position to give that help to someone. I feel like it’s important that if we are able to, we need to help.”

In doing so, the families hope to influence how Islam is perceived by Americans. Mazhar believes that most people who express hatred for Muslims simply don’t know any Muslims. He wants to demystify the faith and break barriers through this work.

“The thought process behind [this program] was building a bridge of communication, getting to know people,” he says. “We can do our part to [eliminate] some of the misconceptions.”

Each Food for Thought meal is packaged with a sticker that reads, *Love from your Muslim Neighbors*. The friends have distributed thousands of them to the residents of the tent city on E Street, and in McPherson Square park in the District. In February, they added another Sunday stop near Union Station.

Mark (who gave only his first name), a food-insecure man who lives with his wife, has known the Food for Thought

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team since the beginning. He says he looks forward to Sundays, not only for the food, but also for the camaraderie.

“Their coffee is incredible, and they have food which is amazing, but they’re also human beings, you know?” he says, smiling under his yellow-ban-danna face covering as he takes his hands out of his jeans pockets to adjust his baseball cap. “They talk to you and they have a bond [with the people they serve], which makes me want to be here to see them. I’m happy to see them.”

Regulars like Mark have become a sounding board for Food for Thought. At the start of 2021, when temperatures plummeted below freezing, Mazhar and his team asked how they could better serve their friends in need. They started driving into the city on Saturdays, and sometimes weekdays, to distribute blankets (which they buy from Walmart), hot chocolate, coffee and tea.

This winter, one of the “brothers” in the homeless community died from the cold. He didn’t have enough warm

clothes to protect him from the elements. Since the man was Muslim, his neighbor asked Mazhar’s group to lead a prayer service. They did so without hesitation, among the tents.

A short time later, another brother died after being hit by a car. That Sunday’s dinner drop became a memorial of sorts. The volunteers shared photos and videos they had taken of the man smiling and singing during previous visits.

Over time, the homespun effort has grown. Friends, neighbors and fellow congregants join the group from time to time, helping to distribute food on weekends. Some leave contributions, such as rice or bread, on Mazhar’s front porch.

The compassion has a multiplying effect. Ahmed was doing door-to-door work as a Census taker in his neighborhood last summer when he met Tahir Rana. “I happened to knock on his door and we started talking,” Ahmed says. Now Rana volunteers regularly with weekend meal deliveries.

Every little bit helps. The organizers pay for all of the food and supplies out of their own pockets, buying in bulk from Costco, Walmart, Amazon and Restaurant Depot.

They hope to continue the momentum—possibly by starting a website to raise awareness and funds. They’ve discussed bringing in a mental health professional who is willing to donate time and expertise to the cause.

“I love to see their smiles,” Mazhar says of his weekend friends in the city. “We have grown relationships with them. Seeing them happy makes us happy.”

The charity of those who expend their wealth in the Way of Allah may be likened to a grain of corn, which produces seven ears and each ear yields a hundred grains, reads a passage in the Koran.

It’s a philosophy these friends both practice and preach. ■

Sydney Johnson also writes the Good Stuff column for Arlington Magazine.