

Remembering a great humanitarian – Abdul Rahim Rasheed QSO

By Arif Rasheed

A MAN who dedicated his life to others was remembered on Friday, 1 December at a special commemorative dinner held at Auckland's Chancery Chambers and attended by His Excellency the Governor-General The Honourable Anand Satyanand, Ministers, Judges, and prominent lawyers.

Abdul Rahim Rasheed QSO (LLB, B.Theol (Auck)) was called to rest on 3 October 2006, ending a life full of humanitarian works. During his years of legal practice, he assisted Pacific, Indian, and Asian peoples to justice at little or no charge, and enabled thousands to migrate to New Zealand during a period of stern hostility towards migrants. He successfully fought gruelling cases in criminal and immigration law, the main one being *Labour Department v Aloua* [1975] 1 NZLR 507, introducing the mens rea ingredient to the offence of overstaying; a case overturned by parliamentary legislation the following year. He was a man who never turned away a client, regardless of their inability to pay fees.

MC Mike Corry recalled a distinct man who used his eloquence and presence to great effect. Immaculate dress, eloquent speech, significant courtroom presence were the hallmarks of Rasheed, as was his position closest to the dock. On a lighter note, there was much reminiscence of the old Magistrates Court on Kingston Street, and the goings on in the lawyer's common room on the



third floor. Tall stories were the order of the day, recalled the Governor-General, while Corry jokingly remembered Rasheed, along with Peter Williams QC, being the only contributors to the room's coffee tin.

The Governor-General, remembering Rasheed as 'Rahim' as he was known to many from law school days, brought with him from the Government House archives the CV upon which Rasheed's QSO honour was based in the Queen's Birthday and Golden Jubilee Honours of June 2002, and proceeded to read out the long list of his contributions to community work. The Governor-General was not surprised Rasheed's humanitarian nature led him to call everyone to the table to talk and make peace.

"Rahim exhibited the characteristics that other lawyers admired of

tenacity and of service to clients. He also had a capacity for benevolence. He seemed easily to grasp and apply the principles of humanitarianism – in his world view and in the way he practised law. It can be said that Rahim was a person whom it could be seen was to a larger extent than many, driven by altruism. To my mind, as I think of him, there was at its heart of this altruism the ideology of humanitarianism to which I referred."

A sufferer of several heart attacks and three open heart surgeries, ill-health eventually prevailed over Rasheed forcing him to retire prematurely from legal practice in 1992. While still doing pro bono work, he undertook more community work at local, national, and regional levels. An ambassador for peace, he began ongoing dialogues with Christians and Jews, later founding the Council of Christians and Muslims (NZ) Inc, and travelled the Pacific to promote Christian-Muslim dialogue. To equip him better in this dialogue, he completed a degree in Christian Theology at the University of Auckland in 1996, despite his failing health.

Rasheed initiated and led the building of the first mosque at Ponsoby in 1979, and acquired other sites where mosques now stand. He was the founder and president of the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand Inc, and was instrumental in arranging halal meat certification, which now earns hundreds of millions of export dollars for New Zealand. Despite ill-health again intervening to force him out of active community work, he soldiered on to write and dis-

tribute material promoting the understanding of Islam vis-à-vis Christianity and other religions in the wider community.

Rasheed left an unrealised dream of a dedicated inter-faith centre for dialogue where education and discussion could continue on an ongoing, regular, and comprehensive basis. Accordingly, in his name and memory, the establishment of the Centre for Inter-faith Dialogue and Education (CIDE), dedicated to him and his 30 years of pioneering inter-faith work, especially between Islam, Christianity and Judaism, has been proposed. The CIDE is widely supported by inter-faith groups and officials, and is an official Human Rights Commission Diversity Project.

In the current climate of hostility and suspicion, his struggle for openness and understanding and for peaceful co-existence between all faiths and groups will be sorely missed, said Rasheed's friend of 25 years the Honourable Phil Goff. He noted that long before it became fashionable, Rasheed was practicing "inter-faith", as we now know it to be, out in the community and in the Pacific. Goff noted that in the current state of world affairs, including recent crises in the Pacific, a man like Rasheed was sorely needed. He commented that the amount and level of community work to promote peace and harmony Rasheed did whilst suffering from life-threatening conditions was testimony to his commitment and belief in what he was doing. He noted how Rasheed contributed vastly to his own community, and as much to all our communities through his works over the past few decades.

At the conclusion of the formal programme, John Moody spoke emotionally about the great man he remembered, the many works they did together, including planning and building the first mosque of New Zealand. He also remembered the stabilising, calming effect Rasheed's wisdom and rationalism had. He analogised him as a giant tree in a forest, that stood over and above other men, and someone he missed very much.

Abdul Rasheed is survived by his widow, two sons and two daughters. They have resolved to help continue his work. For more information on CIDE contact: rasheedtrust@paradise.net.nz.

