

Serving the Community

By Samuel Ayyub Bilal

DALLAS — It seems to Emam Yusef Shah that it was only yesterday that he first heard Islam. He heard it as a young man struggling in the ghetto to make some sense out of a virtually meaningless neighborhood existence to which he was confined near Hamtramck, Mich.

"It was in 1951, and I was at a spot in the neighborhood where it was most unlikely to hear Islam. There was a brother there, however, who had just been receiving the teachings of Islam, and he kept using the word 'salaam,' 'salaam,' 'salaam.'"

Emam Shah, who was known as Joseph then, became so fascinated with the Arabic word meaning "peace" that before he realized what was happening to him he was investigating a term synonymous with salaam—Islam.

"I thought I was a man before then," he said with a chuckle, "but the more I checked into Islam, the more I learned that I had not even been a boy."

In fact, it was his firm conviction that Islam offered manhood and selfhood which accelerated his commitment to the cause of Islam.

"Islam just swept me up. I began to devote all of myself to that cause. By choice and not by force. And I thought Islam was something that everyone should have."

SHATTERS CRITICS' DOUBTS

He was so convinced that Islam was the right path to follow that for the next quarter-century even Shah's severest critics could not doubt that here was a man who concentrated all his energies towards helping to establish the programs of the then Nation of Islam in North America.

He, also because known as one of the best organizers in the Muslim community.

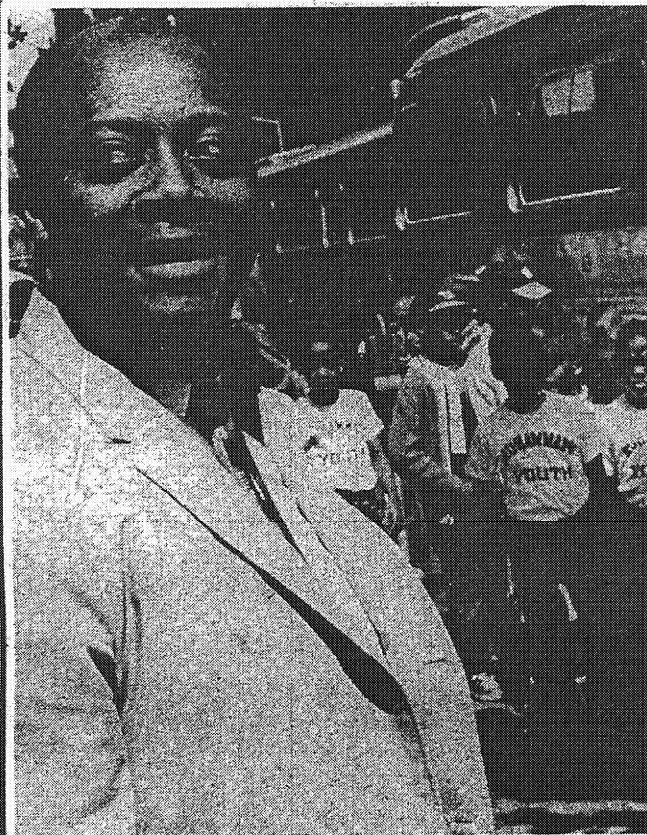
His rise in the Nation of Islam was swift, solid and often colorful. Known as "a brothers' brother," he spent long hours working and studying to prepare himself for the 25 years of captain's work now behind him. He studied Dale Carnegie leadership and management courses, speaking courses and courses to help him better understand human nature.

He sought to model himself on certain aspects of Master Elijah Muhammad, whom he saw as "a man going somewhere because he knew where he wanted to go."

"I didn't think I could do it, but Malcolm kept saying, 'Go on—you can do it! You can do it!'"—Emam Shah recalled, when describing how the late Minister Malcolm Shabazz recognized his organizing and leadership ability.

Minister Shabazz was encouraging him to do the work of a captain in Boston, Philadelphia, New York City and other places during the Muslims' pioneer days. Minister Shabazz was seldom seen, without Captain Joseph, as he was then known.

"I remember how we went to all the best colleges teaching Islam and nobody could challenge us," he recalled with lively humility. "Once, at Cornell University, one of their top professors who was debating Malcolm



Emam Yusef Shah

broke down and started crying. He said: 'I can't find anything in what he's saying to challenge him—can't find a loophole in it.'

NECESSITY DICTATES THE MODE

"Those were some days, brother. You couldn't just lay back in a nice ivory tower and spread Islam. You had to go to the people. I remember how we used to go up to 125th Street in Harlem, and stand up on a ladder and preach Islam. And would go all over the city and countryside selling Muhammad Speaks since renamed Bilalian News."

"We started out selling the Pittsburgh Courier which carried Master Elijah Muhammad's column in it then. That was in 1957, when Ghana got her independence."

"Yes, brother, we used to stand in cold, zero weather and loved to do what

we were doing, even though we were often scorned and ridiculed.

"We also set up many businesses during that time," he noted, "to show our community how to build itself up."

Shah remembered that to one of those businesses, the Shabazz Restaurant, there came many of today's best known personalities who got their start towards fame through curiosity about the growing Muslim community in New York and around the U.S. Among them were the late writer Louis Lomax, James Baldwin, professor C. Eric Lincoln and Alex Haley.

"I remember when Alex Haley came around to interview Malik (Malcolm), and I remember when the others came too. Many came from newspapers and magazines. They didn't have many Bilalian reporters then. But when they would send a Caucasian reporter to us,

we'd say, 'Go back and tell them to send us a black reporter.' Brother that's how a lot of black reporters began to get jobs..."

'I HAVE NO REGRETS'

"If I had it to do over again I would do it the same way," Shah emphasized. "As long as I felt it was right, I would do it again. And I have no regrets."

When asked for the key to his organizing ability, Shah replied matter-of-factly:

"You have to have concern for those you're organizing. You have to take yourself out of it and you have to introduce esprit de corps into them plus be truthful—fair."

Those who were members of the Muslim brotherhood in New York in the late '50s, '60s and early '70s remember the booming, resonant and rhythmic voice of Shah from the rostrum at FOI meetings feeding pride into the nation-building work of the FOI.

And even as a well established, regional captain, he still managed to help sell Muhammad Speaks — "the number one program"—mainly by personally distributing it to newsstands in Harlem.

"Not only do you respect the highest, but the lowest," he said, when telling why he sought to work so closely with the common FOI "soldiers" and brothers who were under his command.

"You have to bring the little people up with you. You can't say I'm going to get up and then reach back and bring them up—you have to all the time be bringing them up."

"And I never was accused of anything and tried to put someone else in front of me to take the heat for it."

Shah said the greatest highlight in his life was when he saw Emam W.D. Muhammad assume leadership of the W.C.I.W. in 1975.

"I had seen and watched him for a long, long time and I knew there was something special about him. And I was so glad to be there when he was installed into office."

Shah said one of the greatest honors of his life was when he was asked by Emam Muhammad last year to move from the captaincy to the ministry.

"I was honored and overwhelmed, but didn't think maybe I could do it. But he said, 'Brother, if you have as much confidence in yourself as I have in you, you will be one of the best.'"

Characteristically, Shah proved he didn't let his mentor down. When he moved to Dallas and assumed the Masjid Muhammad leadership of (Muhammad Mosque) there, he and other W.C.I.W. members in that area went to work and established firmly for the first time, Islam throughout the Southwest Region.

Shah and his wife Naimah have been married since 1955, and they are parents to six children and grandparents to one grandchild.

"And they all were born in the W.C.I.W., and educated in the Clara Muhammad school," he said proudly, noting that two of the girls presently attend college.