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Faith group honours Asper, Lakhani families; 'You should not just take up space in this world'

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TORONTO - The Canadian Council of Christians and Jews honoured the Asper family of Manitoba and the Lakhani family of Toronto last night for their contributions to "the fabric of Canadian culture and society."

The two eminent families were presented with the Human Relations Award at the organization's 60th annual anniversary gala before more than 650 guests at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel in downtown Toronto.

"We believe that it is very important to highlight the work of those people who have done so much to promote cultural acceptance and understanding among Canadians," said Amanda Sherrington, president and CEO of the CCCJ. "I can't think of any two families who epitomize commitment to cross-cultural understanding and inclusion more than the Aspers and the Lakhanis."

The Asper family owns CanWest Global Communications Corp., including the National Post, and contributes to various causes through The Asper Foundation, including education, health care, human rights studies, performances and lectures, theatres and community centres both in Canada and Israel.

"Our families came to this country seeking freedom from persecution, freedom of religion and freedom to speak out the way that they saw fit. They were able to do all that in this country," Gail Asper, managing director of the Asper Foundation, said yesterday.

"The message that we were always given as kids was, 'You should not just take up space in this world; you have an obligation to give back to your communities.' "

The Asper Foundation's much-anticipated Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg is \$22-million from reaching its fundraising goal for the \$265-million project.

The Lakhanis, led by Hassanali Lakhani, founded Toronto's Noor Cultural Centre, which is dedicated to promoting Islamic culture while respecting diversity in people and religions. The centre collaborates with York University on various events, including a lecture series.

Samira Kanji, president of the centre, said it has been her father's dream for years.

"My father said, 'We have to start a place here in Canada that protects our idea of Canadian Muslims,' " she said. "The Canadian Muslim identity is very much guided by this recognition, which the Koran reminds us of, that we are all part of God's creation and that we have been made different.... We start from the premise that we are all equal and it beholds us to learn to get along with one another."

Last night, the council also recognized Harry Belafonte, best known for popularizing Caribbean music, with an international award for his contribution to the advancement of human rights and dignities.

Mr. Belafonte, 80, a son of Caribbean immigrants, has been an advocate for civil rights throughout his career. He was a personal friend of Martin Luther King Jr. and supported the civil rights movement in its early days. More recently, he has focused his efforts on Africa and has been an outspoken critic of U.S. President George W. Bush.

The CCCJ offers a variety of educational programs designed to teach young Canadians about the dangers of discrimination and prejudice, and the value of diversity in Canadian society.



PHOTOS BY PETER J. THOMPSON / NATIONAL POST

Noorband and Hassanali Lakhani, at left, and Leonard Asper with his mother, Babs, at Toronto's Royal York Hotel last night, where they accepted the Human Relations Award from the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews.

Photos By Peter J. Thompson, National Post