

**Testimony of Harpreet Singh Saini**

*before the*

**UNITED STATES SENATE**

**Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights**

**Committee on the Judiciary**

**on**

**“Hate Crimes and the Threat of Domestic Extremism”**

**September 19, 2012**

My name is Harpreet Singh Saini. I would like to thank Senator Durbin, Ranking Member Graham, and the entire subcommittee for giving me the opportunity to be here today. I am here because my mother was murdered in an act of hate 45 days ago. I am here on behalf of all the children who lost parents or grandparents during the massacre in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

A little over a month ago, I never imagined I'd be here. I never imagined that anyone outside of Oak Creek would know my name. Or my mother's name. Paramjit Kaur Saini. Or my brother's name, Kamaljit Singh Saini. Kamal, my brother and best friend, is here with me today.

As we all know, on Sunday, August 5, 2012, a white supremacist fueled by hatred walked into our local *Gurdwara* with a loaded gun. He killed my mother, Paramjit Kaur, while she was sitting for morning prayers. He shot and killed five more men – all of them were fathers, all had turbans like me.

And now people know all our names: Sita Singh. Ranjit Singh. Prakash Singh. Suvegh Singh. Satwant Singh Kaleka.

This was not supposed to be our American story. This was not my mother's dream.

My mother and father brought Kamal and me to America in 2004. I was only 10 years-old. Like many other immigrants, they wanted us to have a better life, a better education. More options. In the land of the free. In the land of diversity.

It was a Tuesday, 2 days after our mother was killed, that my brother Kamal and I ate the leftovers of the last meal she had made for us. We ate her last rotis – which are a type of South Asian flatbread. She had made the rotis from scratch the night before she died. **Along with the last bite of our food that Tuesday...came the realization that this was the last meal, made by the hands of our mother, that we will ever eat in our lifetime.**

My mother was a brilliant woman, a reasonable woman. Everyone knew she was smart, but she never had the chance to get a formal education. She couldn't. As a hard-working immigrant, she had to work long hours to feed her family, to get her sons educated, and help us achieve our American dreams. This was more important to her than anything else.

Senators, my mother was our biggest fan, our biggest supporter. She was always there for us, she always had a smile on her face.

But now she's gone. Because of a man who hated her because she wasn't his color? His religion?

I just had my first day of college. And my mother wasn't there to send me off. She won't be there for my graduation. She won't be there on my wedding day. She won't be there to meet her grandchildren.

I want to tell the gunman who took her from me: You may have been full of hate, but my mother was full of love.

She was an American. And this was not our American dream.

It was not the American dream of Prakash Singh, who had only been reunited with his family for a few precious weeks after 6 years apart. When he heard gunshots that morning, he told his two children to hide in the basement. He saved their lives. When it was over, his children found him lying in a pool of blood. They shook his body and cried "Papa! Get up!" But he was gone.

It was not the American dream of Suvegh Singh Khattra, a retired farmer who came here to be with his children and grandchildren. That morning, his family found him face down, a bullet in his head, his turban thrown to the side.

It was not the American dream of Satwant Singh Kaleka, president of the *gurdwara* who was killed while bravely fighting the gunman.

It was not the American dream of Sita Singh and Ranjit Singh, two brothers who sang prayers for our community and were separated from their families for 16 years. Their wives and children came to this country for the first time for their funerals.

It was not the American dream of Santokh Singh or Punjab Singh who were injured in the massacre. Punjab Singh's sons are by his side day and night, but he may never fully recover from his multiple gunshot wounds.

We ache for our loved ones. We have lost so much. But I want people to know that our heads are held high.

My mother was a devout Sikh. Like all Sikhs, she was bound to live in Chardi Kala – a state of high spirits and optimism. She was also taught as a Sikh to neither have fear of anyone nor strike fear in anyone.

So despite what happened, we will not live in a state of fear, nor will we make anyone fearful.

Like my Mother, my brother and I are working every day to be in a state of high spirits and optimism.

We also know that we are not alone. Tens of thousands of people sent us letters, attended vigils, and gave us their support – Oak Creek’s Mayor and Police Chief, Wisconsin’s Governor, the President and the First Lady. All their support also gave me the strength to come here today.

Senators, I came here today to ask the government to give my mother the dignity of being a statistic. The FBI does not track hate crimes against Sikhs. My mother and those shot that day will not even count on a federal form. We cannot solve a problem we refuse to recognize.

Senators, I also ask that the government pursue domestic terrorists with the same vigor as attackers from abroad. The man who killed my mother was on the watch lists of public interest groups. I believe the government could have tracked him long before he went on a shooting spree.

Finally, Senators, I ask that you stand up for us. As lawmakers and leaders, you have the power to shape public opinion. Your words carry weight. When others scapegoat or demean people because of who they are, use your power to say that is wrong.

So many have asked Sikhs to simply blame Muslims for attacks against our community or just say “We are not Muslim.” But we won’t blame anyone else. An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.

I also want to be a part of the solution. That’s why I want to be a law enforcement officer like Lt. Brian Murphy, who saved so many lives on August 5, 2012. I want to protect other people from what happened to my mother. I want to combat hate – not just against Sikhs but against all people. Senators, I know what happened at Oak Creek was not an isolated incident. I fear it may happen again if we don’t stand up and do something.

I don’t want *anyone* to suffer what we have suffered. I want to build a world where all people can live, work, and worship in America in peace.

Because you see, despite everything, I still believe in the American dream. In my mother’s memory, I ask that you stand up for it with me. Today. And in the days to come.

Thank you for considering my testimony.