

EPA
BIOGRAPHY

He helps people find their human potential

By Hakim Etiope
Special to the Times Tribune

Ben Ahmad's commitment and concern for the East Palo Alto community have been established over the 11 years he has lived and worked there as a vocational rehabilitation counselor for the State Department of Rehabilitation.

Now married and the father of four children (three girls and a boy) ranging in age from nine to 14 years, Ahmad came to East Palo Alto after living in San Francisco, where he had worked for the State Department of Resource Development as a social service aide for four years.

He recalled his early years in the area:

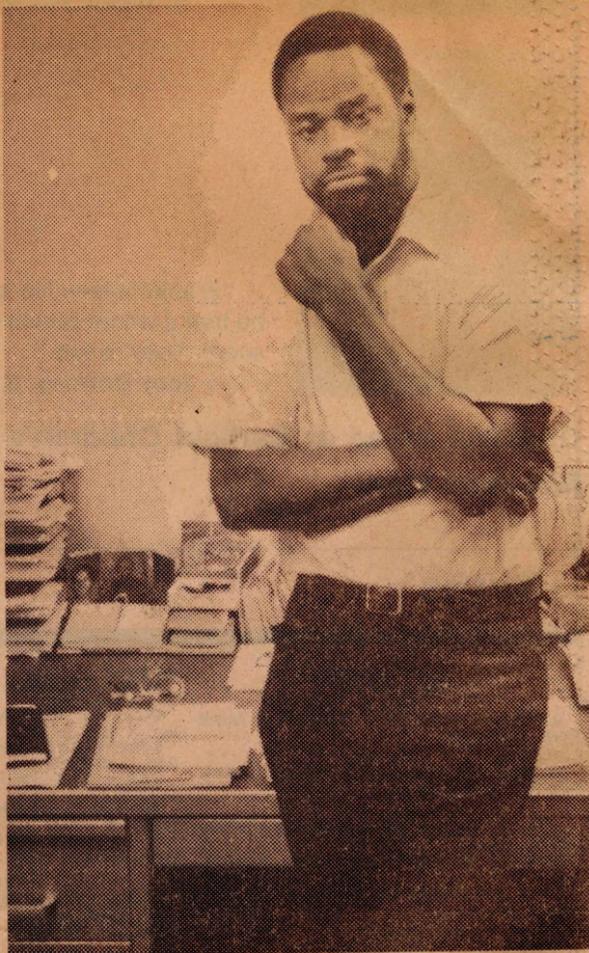
"I moved to San Francisco in 1965 after completing a two-year course in industrial drafting at Pasadena City College. I lived in the Fillmore District, and the condition of the people there was very depressed. Then in 1967, I landed my first major job as an engineering aide for Standard Oil. I remember the stark contrast of going to work in downtown San Francisco and returning home to the Fillmore District."

Ahmad, a self-described "servant of the people," was aware even then that his true calling was not in helping to discover and develop oil resources, but in helping people to "discover and develop their human potential."

After a year of working for Standard Oil, some friends told him about the New Careers Program run by the State Department of Resource Development. Ahmad applied, was hired for a position as a social service aide and remained with the agency until 1974, except for a one-year stint at Presbyterian Hospital as a psychiatric technician.

It was during that time that Ahmad first started going to the Temple of the Nation of Islam, the Black Muslim movement led by Elijah Muhammad from 1934 until his death in 1975.

"I was raised as a Baptist, but I could never accept that the God of all mankind would allow himself to be crucified, or that he would be conquered in his mission of calling mankind to righteousness. When I got to San Francisco, I started attending the Muslim temple because I was curious. My sister was a member of the Nation of Islam, and I liked the way they dignified the ethnic heritage of African Americans," he said.



Times Tribune photo by Victor J. Volta

Ben Ahmad takes a brief time out in his Menlo Park office.

"I had problems with a lot of Elijah Muhammad's other teachings, though. I had read the Koran, and my other readings about Islam did not support Elijah's teachings. It was too easy to characterize the

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African American as all good, and the white race as intrinsically evil.

"It left our people with no responsibility for their own fate. The contradictions between what I had studied about Islam and the nationalistic version taught by the Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad left me unable to accept it as the true religion of Islam," he said.

Though unable to fully accept its teachings, Ahmad continued to attend the Temple, feeling the need for a vehicle to express his concern for "community and humanity." Acutely aware of the issues surrounding the struggle for black political and social equality during the '60s, Ahmad could not identify with Martin Luther King's "emotional appeal to integrate into the mainstream." He believed that the real struggle was and is "for responsibility and integrity. You can't expect people who have difficulty accepting you as a human being to be the ones to provide your integrity."

In 1974, shortly before the death of Elijah Muhammad, Ahmad left the Nation of Islam because he felt "a change was coming." Since that time the Nation has divided into two camps: one, still called the Nation of Islam, continues to espouse the beliefs fostered by Elijah Muhammad under the leadership of Minister Louis Farrakhan; the

other, under the leadership of Imam W.D. Muhammad, son of Elijah Muhammad, has disavowed those teachings, following orthodox Sunni Muslim doctrine and adopting a new name, the American Muslim Mission.

Now a member of the latter sect, Ahmad in 1980 fulfilled one of the greatest obligations of the devout Muslim by making the Hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca.

"I was overwhelmed to go to the land where Abraham and Muhammad lived. I felt a real sense of completeness. My own desire was fully complemented by my religious teachings. The oneness of humanity was really impressed on me. I saw people from Africa, China, Russia, Japan, Yugoslavia and all of the rest of the Muslim world ... When I returned, I felt that my spiritual thirst had been quenched. When you return from the Hajj you are supposed to find more ways to being of service to society. That fit right in with my personal desire to serve," he said.

Ahmad's beliefs find a useful outlet in his job as a vocational rehabilitation counselor at the Menlo Park branch of the state agency. Most of his approximately 200 clients either are unable to work to due physical injuries suffered on or off the job or are afflicted with severe mental and emotional disorders.

During his years with the agency, Ahmad has seen some changes in the availability of resources to serve his clients, and in the number of clients with drug-related

problems.

"About three years ago, a lot more of our clients were people with drug-abuse problems. Now it's no more than 15 percent of our total," he said. "The real difficulty in dealing with drug abusers is that after you've helped to motivate them to want to change their lives and be responsible for themselves, there is a large number that fall back ... They are the group we see over and over again."

For Ahmad, the primary focus is always on the client's ability to accept reality without losing the feeling that he or she can reshape those aspects critical to the client's positive life goals.

While there are a wide range of needs in the East Palo Alto community, from Ahmad's perspective the foremost is moral leadership — "the need to call the people to moral responsibility, so there will be less inclination to teach each other down. People in the religious community will have to take a stand. There must be an attempt to implement religious principles in terms of the real needs of the community."

To this end, Ahmad is working together with the leader of the East Palo Alto American Muslim Mission, Imam Antar Askia Jannal, to "restimulate and rededicate the moral sensitivity of the community." There are plans for a "Moral Walk" through East Palo Alto by members of the American Muslim Mission along with other concerned civic and religious leaders during the month of April.