

Haroon Rasheed

California Beekeeper From Pakistan

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Thirty-two years ago, Haroon Rasheed arrived in the United States as a student. He did not come to be a beekeeper. As a matter of fact, he had a fear of bees since being badly stung by some very unhappy *Apis dorsata* bees after they were disturbed by his brother and friends when he was 10 years old. Those bees make giant combs hanging from tree limbs and are much larger than our *Apis mellifera*. They are one of the three native species that are found in Pakistan. The *Apis mellifera* specie that Haroon now lovingly keeps is considered an exotic one in Pakistan. There are now about 7,000 beekeepers with those honey bees in Pakistan.

Haroon told me the Quran tells us about honey bees. The Bees is the 16th chapter (sūrah) of the Qur'an. It is named after honey bees mentioned in verse 68, and contains a comparison of the industry and adaptability of honey bees to the industry of man. It is interesting to know that 1400 years ago the Quran refers to bees that generate the honey as females

(the Arabic grammar is in the female mode): [Quran 16.68-69] This is what I learned looking it up: "And your Lord (Allah) revealed to the bees: Build your hives in mountains, trees and in what they build. Then, eat of all fruits, and follow the ways of your Lord made easy (for you). From their bellies comes a drink of various colors, in which is health for mankind; indeed, in this is a sign for people who ponder." Muslims, Christians and Jews worship the same God. The Bible has four mentions of bees and multiple references to honey. (My personal favorite is John, the Baptist, eating honey with locust! Not my idea of a good meal but to each his own.)

Haroon keeps close ties to people in Pakistan and has become interested in promoting urban gardening projects there. He is an extremely civic minded person, caring about citizens of his native country and the country he became a citizen of in 2001, the United States of America, particularly his town of Vallejo, California. He has set goals for himself and his beekeeping enterprise. One goal is to encourage more people in Vallejo to become beekeepers. He would like to start a beekeepers' organization soon. The purpose of the organization would be for beekeepers to help each other. With Haroon's fantastic charisma and his wife, Chris, Rasheed's great organizational skills will make this happen shortly after the Covid 19 virus is under control and people can get together. He has already found two possible venues for meeting rooms.

Nine years ago, a swarm landed in his garden. The beekeeper that came to get the swarm became Haroon's first mentor. He was helpful the first year. After the first year Haroon was looking for more information and different beekeeping techniques that he felt more comfortable with. In 2016 he started coming to the Sonoma County Beekeepers' Association meetings after hearing a talk by Christine Kurtz, an active member.

In January of 2017 he organized an event to introduce beekeeping to people in Vallejo. He had Christine Kurtz come to speak about natural local beekeeping and how to save the bees. At this event they let the people taste 20 different local honeys. He has learned a lot from her and another member Serge Labesque. He

has attended lectures and workshops given by Serge Labesque and follows his advice. Labesque is a treatment-free beekeeper and has modified the Langstroth hive a bit to make it closer to how the bees would organize it in nature. For example, Haroon's hives all have follower boards and monitoring boards below the screened bottom boards to determine the health of the colonies.

When I asked Haroon if there was anything special he does with his bees, he laughed and said his wife Chris tells him he should talk more to his bees. One thing he is very careful about is leaving enough honey, so he never has to feed the bees. He considers himself an urban farmer. On his property he has 32 fruit trees with 15 varieties of fruit. Vallejo has an ideal climate for growing various fruits, vegetables and flowers to provide nectar and pollen for his bees. It is on the San Pablo Bay and does not get frost. This year because of the Covid-19 crisis he started his first vegetable garden to supplement his family's and neighbors' food supply. He is encouraging his friends and neighbors to grow more bee friendly plants as well as become beekeepers if they can. In his neighborhood there are now seven apiaries, several small chicken flocks, with many more vegetable gardens and small fruit orchards.

Haroon and Chris have made their neighborhood almost like a



Haroon shares his honey with all the City of Vallejo's helpers. This is one of the many garbage collectors that got a jar.



Haroon's honey.

family. They have various celebrations with them including Halloween, Christmas and Eid (Muslim Holiday) and any other excuses to get together. (This year Chris is already thinking and planning how she can do this with the Covid-19 virus restrictions.)

They have had the neighbors' children paint their beehives. On one hive in his home apiary they painted Salaam in Arabic, Shalom in Hebrew and peace in English and Japanese. Basically, all of those words and different languages mean peace. Sharing honey does promote peace. The honey gathered is shared with all the neighbors not just next door but two blocks in all directions. Their enthusiasm for beekeeping and gardening has spread up and down the nearby streets. The newspaper said they have turned their "C" Street into Bee Street!

In his home country, Mr. Imran Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan made a large step initiating the 10 Billion Tree Tsunami in 2018 to counteract the ravages of climate change in Pakistan. Just recently a record of 2.4 million trees were planted in one weekend! It is one of the countries most affected by increasing heat, floods and drought. Haroon would like to see this sort of program happen here in his adopted country.

His wife reminds him that many such social programs were put in place during the depression, not only for employing the unemployed but creating infrastructure benefiting the entire country. He knows it is helping the out-of-job workers in this pandemic in Pakistan planting thousands of tiny seedlings enabling them to feed their families and help support the economy. It can also help feed the bees.

Haroon and Chris have named



Haroon and his wife Chris in the apiary in his front garden.

their honey business Bee Happy Raw Honey. The unique thing about his business is that he does not sell his honey. He gives it all away! Last year he gave away fifty pounds. He gives it to Congressmen, nurses, doctors, mail carriers and sanitary workers as well as friends and neighbors. He has set a goal this year to give away one hundred pounds of honey. While I was visiting him, he actually passed this goal by giving some of his one-pound jars to the newspaper photographer that was there taking pictures of his gardens. Before I left, he gave me jar number 102 and has many more ready to give away. Their honey label reflects their passion for what they do. It says, "Bee Happy Raw Honey 'Save the Bees' Support Urban Bee Keeping. They can be found at Bee Happy Raw Honey on Facebook or contacted at beehappyrh@gmail.com.

When he was in the clothing

manufacturing business, he had a line of shirts and "hoodies" designed that say, "What's Plan Bee?" and has a large drawing of a bee. When he closed the clothing business, he donated unsold clothing instead of selling it. He is a person who literally would "give you the shirt off his back"!

Another goal Haroon has set is to make his town of Vallejo have the most urban beekeepers in California. This involves a lot of outreach and education, but he has the enthusiasm and drive to do it.

He is also promoting the use of gray water to grow gardens without wasting precious water. California has had many drought years. Haroon is aware that using recycled water and growing more plants and trees without pesticides and herbicides will make a big improvement in the environment and thereby help the bees and other living things be healthier. He is sharing his knowledge of this type of gardening with his neighbors and the people in the city of Vallejo.

In mid-August of 2020 the local newspaper published another article about Haroon and Chris' gardens and beehives with photos of the couple with them. In the article he told the reporter, "As our community faces uncertain times, we actually find ourselves presented with a unique opportunity to create a healthier planet and healthier population. Taking small steps now will affect future generations to come promoting urban farming as a way to adapt to climate change that includes rising temperatures and drought.

Haroon is busy now checking out venues for a future beekeeping organization. He is highly motivated and knows how to spread the word by using the local press and his neighborhood outreach.

His commercial beekeeper friend, Sir Richard Evans from Gold Rush Honey Company has been a big help. This man also believes in the same natural beekeeping methods as Haroon.

Haroon increases his own stock of bees by collecting swarms and making splits. This is how he is helping the neighbors along with being a mentor to them. In the future more people of Vallejo will be benefitting by this model of sharing bees and knowledge. **BC**



Haroon's front garden apiary with the hive that has "peace" in several languages.