

# The New York Times

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January 15, 2010

CHICAGO NEWS COOPERATIVE

## A Street-Level Campaign Intends to Take on Bigotry

By JAMES WARREN

It seems inconceivable that Chicago, aptly tagged “Beirut by the Lake” during the race-driven Council Wars of the mid-1980s, might serve as a national model of multicultural cooperation. This is why a passionate, pragmatic and well-financed coalition merits our attention.

The initiative — One Chicago, One Nation — is intended to engage Muslims with broader local communities; it was unveiled Thursday night at the Cultural Center. With a Republican investment mogul and a young interfaith superstar among its strategists, the initiative seeks to deflate caricature and bigotry by melding an online film contest with community organizing and grants for multicultural partnerships.

The genesis of the diverse effort is the post-9/11 creation of One Nation, which essentially aimed to create positive images of a Muslim population in the United States estimated at three million to six million — potentially larger than the combined estimates for Episcopalians and Presbyterians, at 4.5 million.

It was financed by George F. Russell Jr., of Tacoma, Wash., who built the Frank Russell Company, a billion-dollar investment-services firm best known for the Russell 2000 stock index. Mr. Russell is a Republican and a fervent believer that the West should engage with Islam.

One Nation was somewhat of a success but had run its course. Now a street-level effort is starting here, with Mr. Russell committing more than \$1 million for the first two years.

There will be \$50,000 in prizes for short videos that tell Chicago stories on diversity. Those will be broadcast on Link TV, with winners announced on June 17 at Millennium Park. Link TV, based in San Francisco, seeks to promote global perspectives on the news; it reaches an estimated 42 million homes via satellite and cable television. Entries can be submitted to [www.linktv.org/onechicago](http://www.linktv.org/onechicago) through April 23.

“We think that video has the ability to transcend boundaries,” said Wendy Hanamura, vice president of Link TV, “and that’s why we’re interested.”

Henry Izumizaki, the chief executive of One Nation, based in Gig Harbor, Wash., said: “Our previous digital film contests struck a chord of creativity and drove a younger audience to participate. But our efforts really weren’t moving the dial to the extent we wanted.”

That reality explains the new involvement of two Chicago groups: the Interfaith Youth Core and the Inner-City Muslim Action Network. They will create hundreds of “community ambassadors” and help direct \$200,000 in grants for projects to encourage interfaith cooperation.

Interfaith Youth Core is the brainchild of Eboo Patel, 33, a Muslim born in India who grew up in Chicago. He is a Rhodes Scholar who seeks to alter a discussion of religions from a “clash of civilizations” to a “faith line,” in which religious pluralists are pitted against extremists. His nonprofit group is a presence on campuses nationwide, and he is chairman of an interfaith task force for [President Obama](#).

Just heralded as among “America’s best leaders” by U.S. News & World Report, Mr. Patel believes that religion this century will be defined by “bombs, barriers or bridges.”

With 400,000 Muslims in the metro area, Chicago can be an example of cooperation. Video storytelling is one way to counter stereotypes fueled by Muslim extremists who, Mr. Patel said, “videotape their beheadings and get on the evening news.”

“This will be a national model of interfaith civic engagement in a metro area and recognized as such in several months, attracting significant government and philanthropic matching dollars,” Mr. Patel said.

He will work with Rami Nashashibi, 37, the executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, whose Southwest Side community organization is the main Muslim participant in One Chicago, One Nation. He pushes a broad arts and social justice agenda among a diverse, crime-ridden, low-income constituency and has crafted key alliances with rabbis and others. He lives in Marquette Park, where he tried last year to form a block club to deal with violence.

In Marquette Park, Hispanics were nervous about dealing with blacks, “not to mention what folks feel about Muslims,” Mr. Nashashibi said, “which they might not want to fully communicate with me.”

Can he get them to do so? The most vexing tensions and bias often simmer just beneath the surface of our lives.

*James Warren is a longtime Chicago journalist and the publisher of [The Chicago Reader](#).*