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Thousands attend vigil to honor lives lost

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The Herald-Sun | Bernard Thomas Suzann Barakat (L) react on the death of her brother Deah Shaddy with her parents Barakat (center) and his wife Layla Barakat (R), during a vigil at the University of North Carolina

University leaders, elected officials and leaders of the Triangle's Muslim community stood together Wednesday evening to mourn the loss of and remember the lives of three young people killed Tuesday in Chapel Hill.

Those killed were all Muslim Syrian-Americans. Deah Shaddy Barakat, 23, was a second-year dental student at the UNC School of Dentistry, and his new wife, 21-year-old Yusor Abu-Salha, was preparing to enter the School of Dentistry as part of the class of 2019. Her younger sister, 19-year-old Razan Abu-Salha, an architecture student at N.C. State University, was also killed.

But as people lined up to speak in front of the thousands gathered in their memory, they remembered more than these basic details.



Friends who met Razan in first grade remembered her as an artistic genius, a person who loved serving her community and a girl who loved all breakfast food — especially French toast.

Another group of friends remembered Yusor as someone who was giving. A friend, who planned to enter the School of Dentistry along with Yusor, spoke through tears about the time Yusor bought her a UNC School of Dentistry sweater so that they could announce their plans for the future together.

North Carolina State University Chancellor Randy Woodson said that Deah was “a man who has the most amazing bear hug you could ever experience.”

School of Dentistry Dean Jane Weintraub remembered Deah’s “1,000-watt smile and his way of truly getting to know everyone.”

On the screen behind those who spoke, a slideshow of pictures scrolled through the victims' wedding photos, community service photos and photos with family members and friends.

The victims attended both UNC-Chapel Hill and N.C. State, and both UNC Chancellor Carol Folt and Woodson offered their condolences at the candlelight vigil.

But other university leaders were present to offer their support. Chancellor Debra Saunders-White of N.C. Central University said that they were prepared to "stand shoulder to shoulder as a community" to prove that "diverse populations make a difference, and Muslim American lives do matter."

Larry Moneta, vice president for student affairs at Duke University, was also in attendance, as was UNC system president Tom Ross.

"When something like this happens on one of our campuses — whether it's a UNC campus or another college campus — it really reminds us that we're all one big campus. We're all one community, and we're all one humanity," Ross said.

Buses transported students from other campuses to a prayer gathering and period of reflection followed by the vigil.

Leaders of the Muslim community said they have been comforted by outpourings of support not only locally, but from around the world.

Imam Abdullah Antepli, chief representative of Muslim affairs at Duke, said that gatherings such as the vigil reveal the best of communities like Chapel Hill and the surrounding regions. He said he was glad to see people coming together "in the face of such a tragic and horrific event that will not knock us down but bring us closer together."

He said that even though it has not been determined whether the shooting was motivated by hate for religion, tragedies like this do expose vulnerabilities in the Muslim population. He said there were 700 Muslim families in Chapel Hill that did not send their children to school today out of fear.



Omid Safi, director of the Duke Islamic Studies Center, agreed.

“It should not be the job of frightened young people to persuade the rest of humanity that they deserve to live and they are fully human,” he said.

Although grieving, Deah’s siblings said the families know their loved ones are at peace.

Deah’s older brother established a Facebook page called “Our Three Winners,” which by Thursday night had received more than 79,000 likes and messages of support from across the world.

He said that originally he was going to name the page “Our Three Angels,” but he thought that was overused.

“They’ve won,” he said. “They’ve passed the challenge that was this life.

“I plead you live in their legacy and share the good that you know of them,” he told the crowd. “And take the message that my mom wanted to make public: Do not fight fire with fire.”

Deah’s older sister, Suzanne Barakat, shared a similar message.

“We hope that in spite of this tragic loss their love will continue to inspire more love, break down ignorance and unite us all because we are one humanity,” she said.

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