



The Face of Forgiveness

After he was shot, **Rais Bhuiyan**
worked to save the life of the man
who pulled the trigger

BY MIKE SAGER

● FROM *Esquire*



In 2001, ten days after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center towers, Rais Bhuiyan suffered a terrorist attack of his own.

The Bangladesh native had been living in Dallas only four months, having moved from Manhattan, seeking a more affordable lifestyle. A year earlier, he'd experienced impossible good luck: He was one of the thousands of winners among the millions who'd applied to the United States' national green-card lottery of 2000. Even though he'd been cautioned by his friends in the immigrant community that the natives in Texas could be somewhat hostile, Bhuiyan had his heart set on bringing over his fiancée and starting a family as soon as he could. Given the promise by a friend of a job and a place to live, and with plenty of opportunities for continued education, Bhuiyan thought Dallas seemed like a perfect fit. He was already 27. He was ready to start his life.

Just after noon on September 21, Bhuiyan was working an extra shift at a Texaco station—subbing for a friend—when Mark Stroman, a 31-year-old meth addict and father of four with a shaved head, a long criminal record, and an array of racist tattoos, walked into the minimart where Bhuiyan was standing behind the counter and did what he said “millions of Americans wanted to do” after 9/11: From a distance of about four feet, he took his revenge with a sawed-off shotgun.

When Stroman entered the store carrying his double-barreled shotgun, Bhuiyan figured he was about to experience his second robbery. The first time, he thought the robber was trying to sell him a handgun—locals

were always trying to sell him TVs and watches and other stolen merch.

Bhuiyan asked, “How much?”

The man cocked the hammer.

This time, Bhuiyan was prepared. He did the sensible thing and immediately emptied the cash register. Per his boss's instructions, there was only about \$150 in the drawer. “Sir, here's the money,” Bhuiyan said. “Please don't shoot me.”

Then Stroman asked, “Where are you from?”

Oddly, it was not an unusual question in the days after September 11. Just the day before, in fact, Bhuiyan had been talking about Islam and geography with a couple of friendly police officers who always stopped by for sodas and snacks—they were

interested to learn that the religion was practiced by people who weren't even Arab.

Bhuiyan heard an explosion. At first it seemed far away, one of the random gunshots typical of the neighborhood. Then his body was jerked back, and he felt "a million bee stings" on his face. He looked down and saw blood pouring as if from an open faucet on his right side, and he thought, Maybe my brain is going to come out pretty soon; I have to keep it from spilling out. He applied both palms to his slippery head. He wondered, Am I dying today?

Then he hit the deck.

Mark Stroman would later tell police he was hunting Arabs. His claim to have a sister who died in one of the Twin Towers was never confirmed. Bhuiyan was one of three victims. The others were immigrants from Pakistan and India. Neither was Arab. Neither survived. Between them, they left behind two wives and six children.

Stroman was tried for the murder of the Indian, a 49-year-old Hindu named Vasudev Patel. That shooting, also in a convenience store, at close range with a .44-caliber pistol, was caught on tape.

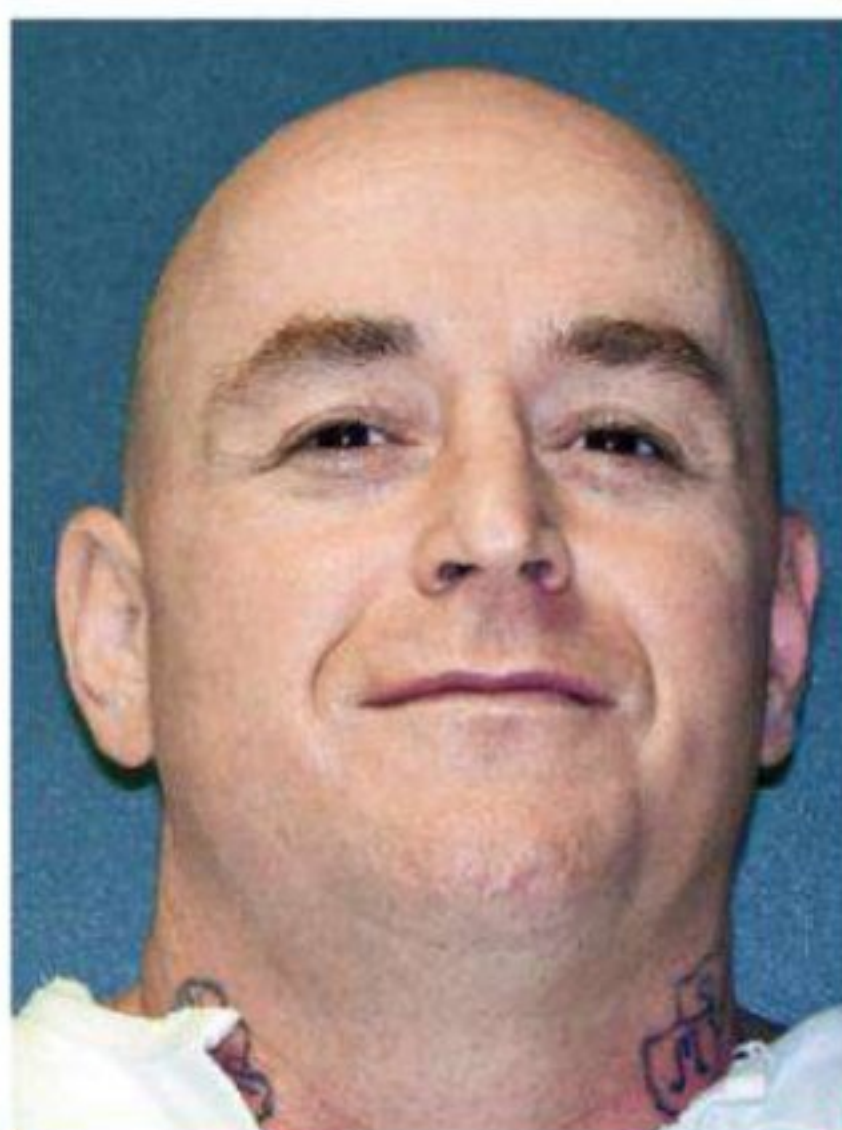
Stroman showed no remorse at trial. In 2002, he was found guilty and

sentenced to death for the shooting of Patel. His was one of the first such cases to be tried under the state's new hate-crime statutes, created partly in response to the death of James Byrd, Jr., an African American man from Texas who was dragged behind a pickup truck for three miles, causing decapitation.

Bhuiyan survived with 38 pellets embedded in his face, scalp, and eye. Because he had no health insurance and no one to drive him to treatment consistently, he lost sight in his right eye—he now sees only blobs of light. The pellets irritate the nerves under his skin. He doesn't sleep on his right side. Getting a haircut can be agony if the barber isn't careful.

Since the shooting, he has had two of the most bothersome pellets removed—a process that involved much yanking, like an old-fashioned

dentist pulling a tooth, and copious amounts of blood. The worst piece was embedded in the center of his forehead. A devout Muslim, he prays five times a day. Every time his head touched the floor, the pain was excruciating. The lead sphere was flattened into the shape of a pancake by the impact against his skull. His mother had always told him he was hardheaded. Now he knew for sure. He chose not to keep the souvenir.



Stroman, 31 in 2001, had a criminal history that began before he was ten.

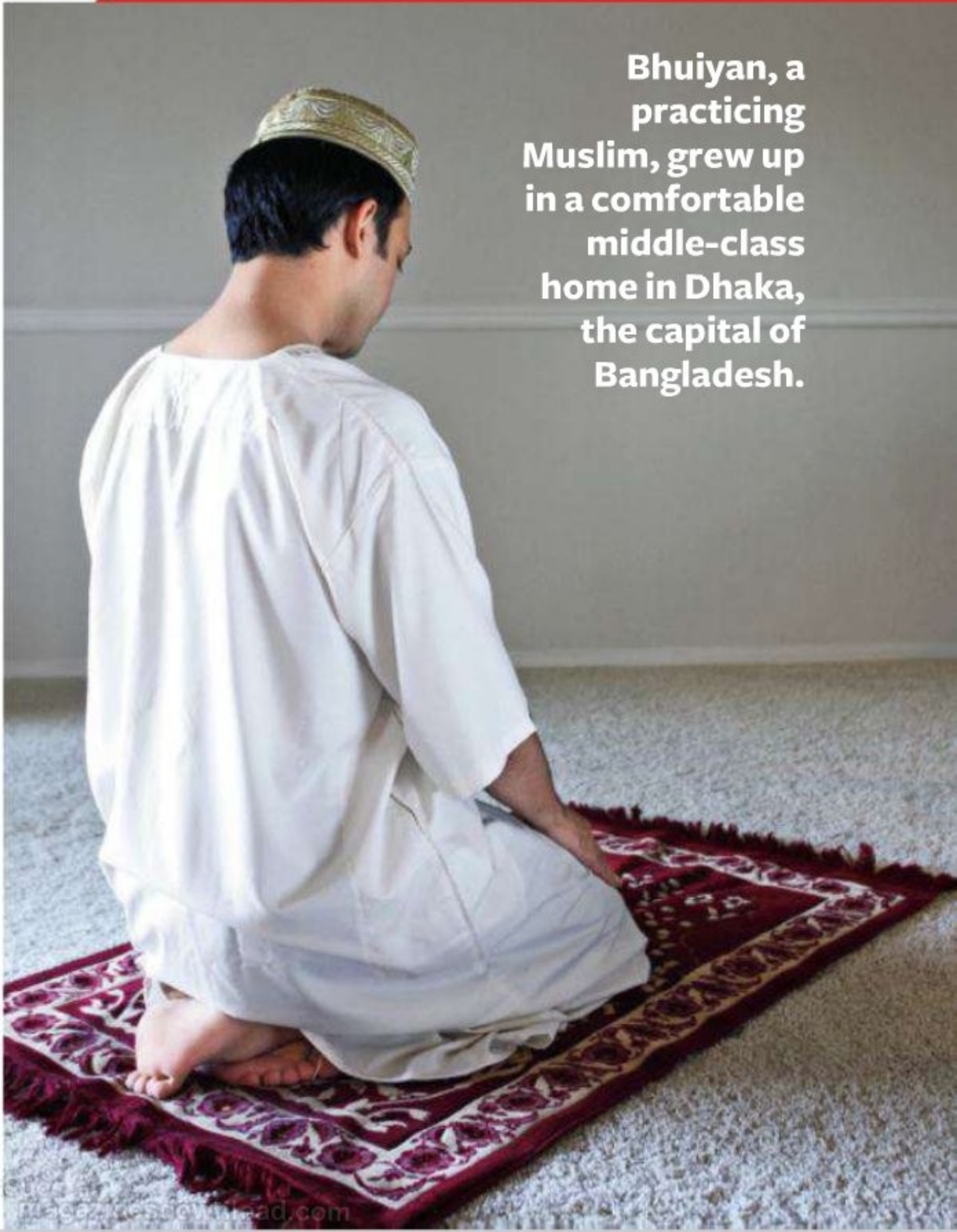
After Stroman was remanded to death row, Bhuiyan got on with his life the best he could. He had no car, no money, tens of thousands of dollars in medical bills, and no place to live—the friend and employer who had brought him here made him feel like a burden. Even so, Bhuiyan was too proud to go home. He'd given up his future in Bangladesh's more elite circles to try his hand at the American dream. He'd promised success to his beloved mother and father, who'd backed his decisions and happily financed his whim. Meanwhile, his fiancée had moved along; she could no longer wait. There was nothing left for him.

Bhuiyan stayed in Dallas, living on couches. For a long time, he was afraid to go outside. He probably suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, but he couldn't afford counseling. In 2003, after much prayer, he decided to seek employment as a waiter in a restaurant. What better way to acclimate himself to people? He started at Olive Garden. Along the way, the Red Cross determined he was not eligible for payment from its 9/11 fund and could not give him anything but free food, which he adamantly declined. Later, with the help of a friendly doctor, Bhuiyan's medical bills were paid by a state-run victims'-compensation fund. With most of his debt cleared, he was able to open a new bank

account, rent an apartment, apply for credit, buy a car.

By November of 2009, after attending for free a computer school owned by a member of his mosque (and starting a company to promote the restaurant software he'd designed with his teacher), Bhuiyan felt strong and flush enough to keep what he'd thought was a deathbed promise to Allah: to make the hajj to Mecca.

Because his father had already been three times, he took his mother, who had never made the sacred pilgrimage, one of the five pillars of Islam. The pair stayed an entire month, praying among the millions of faithful.

A photograph of a man, identified as Bhuiyan, kneeling on a red and white patterned prayer rug. He is wearing a white thobe and a gold-trimmed ghutra. He is barefoot and looking down. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Bhuiyan, a practicing Muslim, grew up in a comfortable middle-class home in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

“Mark Stroman made a mistake. There is nothing we can get by killing him. He must be saved,” said Bhuiyan.

Bhuiyan returned to Dallas a different man. “I could feel that I’m not worried about myself anymore,” he would later explain. “Instead, I started thinking about this guy, Mark Stroman, who is waiting behind bars for the last nine years to die.”

“He’s a human being like me,” Bhuiyan remembers thinking. “He made a mistake. Definitely it’s a terrible mistake, no doubt about that. But in the Koran, it says very clearly that if you’re in a situation like mine, either you can ask for justice, you can ask for financial compensation, or you can forgive. And once you forgive, that means he is forgiven; he

is not supposed to go and serve time behind bars. Once I forgive him, what is the point of punishing him again? That is Islamic teaching. I suffered the worst I could. These two women who lost their husbands, and the children, they suffered too. But there is nothing we can get now by killing Mark Stroman. He must be saved.”

Polite and somewhat impish, with an endearingly bashful smile and a musical South Asian lilt, Bhuiyan set out to implement a public campaign for Stroman. He got busy on the Internet, doing research. He attended fund-raising programs, listened to speakers, began to build a network. Finally, he met a professor at Southern Methodist University, Rick Halperin, who had a long history of battling against the death penalty in Texas. Over the past decade, despite a dip in violent crime, the Lone Star State has averaged 25 executions per year, the highest rate in the modern history of the death penalty.

Halperin is the former chairman of the board of Amnesty International U.S.A. With his help, on May 16, 2011—about 18 months after Bhuiyan’s hajj and after his pledge to save Stroman—an article was published in the *Dallas Morning News*: “Bangladesh Immigrant Seeks Stay of Execution for Man Who Shot Him in 9/11 Revenge Attack.”

In a longish op-ed piece that ran a few days later in the *Morning News*, Bhuiyan called for a reduction of Stroman’s death sentence to life without parole.

“Hey, man,” Stroman said on the phone, “thanks for everything you’ve been trying to do for me. You are inspiring.”

“I forgave Stroman many years ago,” Bhuiyan wrote. “I believe he was ignorant and not capable of distinguishing between right and wrong; otherwise, he wouldn’t have done what he did ... I believe that by sparing Stroman’s life, we will give him a chance to realize, through time and maturity, that hate doesn’t bring a peaceful solution to any situation. Perhaps, if given the opportunity, it might generate such a positive influence on him that he may want to become a spokesman against hate crimes.”

There was only one problem: Stroman was due to be executed in exactly two months. The date was set: July 20, 2011.

Overnight, Rais Bhuiyan became internationally known—the subject

of articles, TV interviews, blogs, and news reports. Yet he got nowhere in his quest. With the clock ticking down toward Stroman’s execution, Bhuiyan bounced back and forth between Stroman’s lawyers and state officials. Mired in law and red tape, Bhuiyan finally found an attorney, Khurram Wahid, who took his case pro bono.

Together with an anti-death-penalty group called GRACE, Wahid pushed Bhuiyan’s case through the state courts on grounds of victims’ rights. But as it became clear that any thought of commutation in Governor Rick Perry’s Texas was folly, Bhuiyan’s team sought at least to engineer a face-to-face meeting with Stroman.

On the day of the scheduled execution, with eleventh-hour legal wrangling still proceeding in the courts, Bhuiyan made one last, unsuccessful attempt to call the prison in Huntsville and speak to Stroman.

Moments later, he called an Israeli filmmaker, Ilan Ziv, who’d been following Stroman for years. Ziv was on the prison grounds, talking with Stroman, and said that Stroman had been expressing remorse for his crimes, his racist beliefs. He’d been especially touched by Bhuiyan’s unselfish campaign to have his sentence commuted.

Ziv offered to facilitate a conversation via speakerphone. Bhuiyan accepted. His legal team gathered around. This is part of their exchange, as taped by Ziv:

“Hey, man,” Stroman said in his heavy Southern accent, “thank you for everything you’ve been trying to do for me. You are inspiring. Thank you from the heart, dude.”

“Mark, you should know that I am praying to God, the most compassionate and gracious. I forgive you, and I do not hate you. I never hated you ...”

“Hey, Rais, they are telling me to hang up now. I will try to call in a minute.”

The line went dead. Bhuiyan was frustrated. “I never got the chance to tell him why I forgive him,” he lamented. “That was the whole point, and I didn’t get to say it.” He looked out the window. “This is not what I wanted.”

At 8:53 p.m., Mark Stroman was put to death by lethal injection.

After the execution, Bhuiyan’s career as a crusader against hate crime took off. As part of his campaign, he founded an organization called World Without Hate. Nearly every weekend, he was jetting somewhere

to give a speech. He was also helping Stroman’s down-on-her-luck 20-something daughter and grandchild, as well as the widows and children of Stroman’s other victims. And he was busy navigating the fraught world of donations and volunteers, answering tons of e-mail, working on a book, and managing all the media requests.

“There’s a lot of Mark Stroman on the street,” Bhuiyan said in an interview two months after Stroman was executed. “In this country and also in the world, there’s a lot of hate. If you don’t like my color or my faith or my accent, well, I cannot change because that is the way I was born.” He was full of doubt about the direction his life should take—whether he should quit his six-figure IT job and commit to helping people full-time, which he calls his “destiny.” But he was clear about the message he wanted to deliver. “It’s important to let people know not to hate each other because they’re different. If you really want to hate, hate that attitude.” ■

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DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HISTORY

An anonymous history professor was either so horrified or bemused by his students’ papers that he collected their oddest insights:

- “During the Middle Ages, everybody was middle aged.”
- “The Black Death helped the emergence of the English language as the national language of England, France, and Italy.”
- “History, a record of things left behind by past generations, started in 1815.”

Source: wilsonquarterly.com