

Funds Raised to Rebuild Arab American Action Network After Suspicious Fire

Supporters of the Arab American Action Network, which suffered major damage in a suspicious fire in December, turned out in force Jan. 27 for a fund-raiser that featured classical Arabic music.

A domed, marble and mosaic-tiled hall in the Chicago Cultural Center was the appropriate setting for the performing ensembles, whose music was infused with spicy rhythms and Spanish motifs, reminiscent of the time when the Islamic empire spanned several cultures.

About 350 people attended the Sunday afternoon concert by three Chicago-based groups. The al-Sharq Ensemble focuses on studying and performing Middle Eastern folk and art music. The al-Amal Ensemble performs a spectrum of North African and Middle Eastern musical genres, emphasizing rhythmic percussion. The Issa Boulos Quintet, which performs all original music, played eclectic pieces incorporating jazz and Flamenco guitar.

Boulos, a Palestinian *oud* player, participated in all three musical groups, and wrote much of the music that was performed. According to information he provided, he has explored several forms of music, including jazz, European classical, Flamenco, contemporary and Middle Eastern classical and folk repertoire. His pieces have been performed at the Chicago Music Festival and the Jerusalem Festival of Arabic Music and Jazz. Boulos currently is an instructor at Chicago's Columbia College and at the Old Town School of Folk Music.

All three ensembles, as well as the cultural center, donated their services to the network's fund-raiser.

Members of the AAAN, who had been nearly overwhelmed with the task of cleaning up after the fire while maintaining their social service programs, were

pleased with the event's turnout. Final figures from the fund-raiser were not available.

Chicago police still are investigating the motive behind the Dec. 4 fire that has been ruled arson. The conflagration gutted the building that housed the Arab American Community Center and the action network, which lost nearly everything. Officials have not released damage estimates.

Network officials say they don't know whether the arson was a hate crime, and the Chicago Police civil rights division has not issued a decision, said Hatem Abudayyeh, AAAN acting director.

"We hope to God it's not a hate crime. It's awful, it's heinous," said Wadid AlBassam, an AAAN board member. "We did receive threats right after Sept. 11."

Photographs displayed at the event showed that the network's offices, a meeting place that had been made festive by murals, paintings and posters, now was nothing more than a shell littered with burned-out debris.

Receipts from the fund-raiser will help the organization to rebuild, an effort AlBassam hopes should be finished in early summer.

The AAAN was founded in 1995 to address the needs of the Arab immigrant community. Their programs, which include citizenship courses, ESL classes, public health benefits programs, homework clubs, mentoring and tutoring, and youth and family empowerment programs, continued uninterrupted, from other locations, after the fire.

Abudayyeh introduced the concert by thanking the Southwest Youth Collaborative and Metropolitan Family Services for opening up space in their respective offices to the AAAN. He also had words of praise for the mixed group of supporters who came to help them dig out from the tragedy.

“ The morning after the fire was, at once, a sad and overwhelming day. Many community residents—Arabs, African Americans, Latino, white, Muslim, Christian and Jewish—arrived at the center and helped us to salvage what we could for our operations,” Abudayyeh said. “ It was a special moment that speaks to the existence of a common humanity, and strength of conviction.”

After the music ended, AAAN board member Layla Suleiman said that the outpouring of support the network has received has helped re-energize the organization.

“ It is our hope that this music has lifted your spirits and souls, and that it encourages you,” Suleiman told the audience. “ Your presence nourishes our commitment. We can change the world, one day, one child at a time.

“ We hope you work with us as we rise from the ashes,” she said. “ The Arab American Action Network is here to stay.”

—Kristin Szremski