The Jami Mosque was not, as many people assume, Toronto’s first mosque. In fact, that honor belongs to an old leather shop that was purchased by the Muslim Society of Toronto in 1961 and transformed into the Dundas Street Mosque by a small hard-working team of Muslims.

This fact was discovered through an oral history project undertaken by the Toronto-based Tessellate Institute (tessellateinstitute.com) during the summer of 2009. The story of this mosque and the community that sustained it is an untold chapter of the history of Canadian Muslims—a history that itself lies cloaked in obscurity. Imaan Communications, which filmed and edited the project, has created an open access website (mosqueone.com) that contains video clips of the founders as well as photographic and legal documents.

Kathleen Wynne, then Ontario’s Minister of Education, speaking at the web launch last Nov. 2009, said that the online archive serves as an “amazing educational resource.” The oral history project was funded by The Olive Tree Foundation (olivetreefoundation.ca) and cosponsored by the International Development & Relief Foundation (idrf.com).

By 1968 the community needed more space, and so the shop was sold and the mosque moved to an old church, renamed Jami Mosque, from which the legend of it being the city’s first mosque sprang.

The first mosque was situated in one of Toronto’s business areas. As Talat Muinuddin (a member) noted: “People didn’t have cars, and the location [of the mosque] was [ideal] … so that they could come by streetcar and buses.”

Toronto’s diverse cultural and religious population was reflected in this original community. Its members came from Albania, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, and even a few White converts. The driving force was Regip Assim, the Albanian founder and president of the Muslim Society of Toronto. Assim, a quiet and dedicated man who used to tell amazing stories of being among revolutionaries in Albania, is described by compatriot and vice president Bedri Bylykbashi as a “very honest man, [who] was working with the heart … only for Muslim faith.”

To transform the shop into a mosque required basic repairs, such as fixing a leaking roof, and many other renovations. Hasan Karachi provid-

An oral history project undertaken by the Toronto-based Tessellate Institute uncovers an untold chapter of the history of Canadian Muslims.

By Aziza Hirsi and Katherine Bullock
ed the paint, and Mustafa Djukic helped retile the roof. Together they “worked [for] almost two years without any pay,” as a form of sadaqah.

Soon the place was transformed into a home away from home for the rapidly growing number of Muslims, a place that helped them overcome homesickness and isolation and provided solidarity, networking, job assistance, and long-lasting friendships. The mosque functioned as a place of prayer, social and educational gatherings, Eid dinners, and a Sunday Islamic School for children.

The community’s strong bonds and tight-knit atmosphere encouraged Dr. Fuad Sahin and his wife Solnaz to make the one-hour journey from Hamilton to Toronto every Sunday just to be part of it. Solnaz remembers how

Ramadan was a special time that brought the community together — despite the lack of a kitchen. She and others would prepare food at home. “We cooked here [at home] and take it there [to the Islamic Centre],” she reminisces. “We ate together. It was nice.”

While the need to self-identify as Muslim was not so important in their native lands, the community’s small size and its members’ minority status made it more important here. Amjad Syed noted that in Canada his faith and skin color set him apart from others. Yet he remembers vividly the first time he prayed with Muslims from all different backgrounds: “I tell you I was so thrilled, especially for the first time in my life. I was standing in the row of salat al-dhuhur. There was a white person, black person, brown person, in my — in my lifetime I had never come across a thing like that … I tell you, literally, I remember there were teardrops in my eyes because of this kind of situation…with a white Muslim and a black Muslim standing in the same row with — with me. It was amazing, it was amazing.”

Among the pioneers were women who played significant roles in fundraising, educating the children, and other mosque activities. Solnaz notes that she and others were motivated “to do something [like] raise money” for the Islamic center. Concerned with passing on their faith to their children, they worked hard to establish a Sunday school. Naturally, there were many setbacks. “Well, one of the first things of course is that there weren’t any books. The classes were very small — very haphazard — not very organized,” recalls Alia Hogben. “But we cared a lot about the children, so they were involved in a lot of things.”
Dr. Sahin agrees, noting that he “was concerned about the future of young Muslims born and raised [in Canada]. But all my worries — like the worries of most of my friends there — were futile because we discovered that all of these children whose parents were involved in the Islamic movement grew up to be wonderful Muslims, wonderful citizens of Canada and well educated and respected.”

The Islamic Centre, the heart of the Muslim community, was the scene of many noteworthy historical events, such as the visit by Malcolm X. Murray Hogben, who had arranged the speech, invited Malcolm to dinner at his home first. “We talked […] and had a nice time. We ate and […], put [Malcolm] in the car and took him to the Centre,” he said. “He spoke […] and then we were photographed with him. I had framed [a] paper, […] with Arabic inscription [in] one of these gold frames, which were available then and that was our little gift to him.” Sadly, soon after that Malcolm X was assassinated; the brief encounter so many years ago still brings tears to the eyes of those who remember his visit to Dundas Street.

Other historical nuggets have been discovered, such as the fact that Dr. Hussain Ibrahim Saleh al-Shahristani, Iraq’s current oil minister, was the center’s Sunday school teacher while earning his Ph.D. at the University of Toronto. The Muslim Student Association of Toronto was founded by people who were also active at the center. As the need for more space became urgent, the community sold the Dundas Street Mosque and purchased a former church (now the Jamia mosque). “[It] cost us $150,000.00, and that was a lot of money then,” Mrs. Hogben says. “But we were so excited you know, and so this was going to be the new place.”

But there were also divisions and disagreements within the rapidly expanding community. Before long, these differences of opinion created splits within the community. “[A]nd then the community decided to split off … instead of staying together,” she laments, “… so now the Albanians have their own mosque, the Bosnians have their mosque, and so on and so forth. … For me, it has been one of the tragedies.”

In the end, less than ten years after its establishment the center closed its doors and its members went their separate ways. Yet each group has, in its own way, carried the spirit of Islam through its own community, carving a niche and making a rich contribution to Canada’s diverse religious and cultural landscape.

Toronto’s first mosque was in fact a converted leather shop that was transformed into the Dundas Street Mosque by a small hard-working team of Muslims.

Dr. Rahman Syed and Dr. Afzalunnisa Syeda visit the Dundas St. Mosque with their family; (below, from left) Amjad Syed, standing, Regip Assim, Imam Khattab, Murray Hogben, during a fundraising dinner hosted by The Muslim Society of Toronto, at Hart House, University of Toronto, April 29 1966, and attended by several local politicians.