

Benefit celebrating unity still relevant EFFORTS REFOCUS TO HELP TSUNAMI VICTIMS

By Lisa Fernandez, Mercury News

Some of the well-intentioned community events that were so numerous following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks have lost steam and fizzled as groups changed focus or moved on.

Not so with Unity Dinner, hosted by Fremont community activist Jeevan Zutshi.

Not long after Sept. 11, three years ago, the civil engineer and real estate investor woke up one morning and realized what a great country he had moved to 32 years ago from his strife-ridden home of Kashmir -- a hotbed of Muslim-Hindu tensions on the border of India and Pakistan. People in the tolerant Bay Area were still kind to him -- an immigrant with olive skin.

"After what had happened, I thought there would be a backlash and we would be persecuted," Zutshi said. "We, as people who even looked like the terrorists. But that didn't happen. People here are very broad-minded. They have accepted the diversity and our contributions. I thought we should celebrate this."

Under the auspices of the Indo-American Community Federation, a non-profit group he founded in 1996, Zutshi began hosting a dinner with politicians and leaders from various cultural groups. His federation's mission is to showcase Indian culture, promote positive relations between India and the United States through seminars and conventions, and provide financial assistance to social welfare programs.

Normally, the theme of the dinner is simply "Unity." This year, the focus is being tweaked slightly to include the victims of the South Asian tsunami, a disaster that has brought the world together in sorrow and relief efforts. Proceeds from the dinner will go to an unnamed relief organization to benefit tsunami victims.

This year's guest list includes: Reps. Pete Stark, D-Fremont, and Mike Honda, D-Campbell, Insurance Commissioner John Garamendi and state Assemblyman Alberto Torrico, D-Fremont. Zutshi said the dinner is not political. But it's important to him that elected officials be there.

"They're invited because they represent us," he said. "It's important they hear what the grass-roots people have to say."

This year's dinner will be held at the Newark-Fremont Hilton on Jan. 21. It's \$65 a person, and the price includes dinner and a fashion show and other entertainment by In Diva, run by Rennu Dhillon of Fremont. The public is invited. Last year, there were 525 guests.

For more information, click on www.indocommunity.us, or contact Zutshi by e-mail at JeevanZutshi@aol.com or (510) 589-3702.