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LARRY SHABEN, 73: COMMUNITY ACTIVIST

Obituaries

**Alberta politician was Canada's first Muslim cabinet minister; The son of a Lebanese immigrant who settled in the northern reaches of the province, he represented Lesser Slave Lake. The commute to Edmonton almost cost him his life**

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On the evening of Oct. 19, 1984, a twin-engine Piper Navajo Chieftain belonging to Wapiti Aviation smashed into the trees of a snow-covered hill about 260 kilometres northwest of Edmonton, killing six of 10 people on board. Among the four survivors was Larry Shaben, the first Muslim cabinet minister in Canada and among the first Canadians of Arab descent to be elected to public office in the country. A politician, businessman and community leader, Mr. Shaben was a Conservative MLA from 1975 to 1989 serving in three cabinet portfolios including minister of economic development and trade.

Also surviving the crash were the pilot, a prisoner and his RCMP escort. With the pilot and police officer severely wounded, Mr. Shaben and the prisoner, Paul Archambault, scavenged wood and burned seats from the plane to keep the group warm. Huddled around a smoky campfire, the four men spent a long, dark night in sub-zero temperatures with virtually no emergency supplies. Hardest to endure, however, were the moans from injured passengers who would not live to see the light. The group was rescued 12 hours later.

Of all the events in Mr. Shaben's eventful life, the plane crash affected him most. Publicly, it showcased his dignity, courage and humility. Refusing to be a victim, he walked off the rescue helicopter even though he suffered broken ribs, a cracked tailbone, two broken teeth and a battered face. The other survivors were carried out on stretchers. Although the crash left him terrified, he knew he would have to fly again and forced himself to board a plane three weeks later. "Not only did he get on a plane," said his son Larry Shaben Jr., "but on a plane with the same airline."

As it turned out, Wapiti was shut down by Transport Canada less than two years after the crash.

Privately, Mr. Shaben's brush with death hardened his resolve to use what time he had wisely. For years after, he wondered why he lived while others died. Close relations developed between the survivors. Mr. Shaben and Mr. Archambault – whose mischief charges were dismissed – became good friends. Every year on the anniversary of the crash, Mr. Shaben phoned the pilot to say "aren't we lucky to be alive?"

As if one wake-up call wasn't enough, another came just two years later. Mr. Shaben and his wife, Alma Shaben, were driving an isolated stretch of highway east of High Prairie, Alta., when they spotted a pair of stranded motorists in the ditch. Believing it was his civic duty to stop, Mr. Shaben approached the two young men and asked if they needed help. Instead of receiving gratitude, however, the couple was fiercely beaten. Mr. Shaben was also bitten on the hand and part of his hair was burned.

As horrific as the attack was, his daughter Carol Shaben said it didn't deter her father from wanting to help strangers in distress. She describes her father as an exemplary role model. "He was my philosopher-guru."

Mr. Shaben drew on a remarkable pioneer past. One of five children born to Albert Mohamed Shaben and Lila Kazeil, he was the grandson of Saleem Sha'aban (Sam Shaben), a Lebanese merchant who immigrated to Alberta early in the last century. In those days, Arab immigrants to northern Alberta settled in small towns and hamlets but as their numbers grew mothers became eager to move to Edmonton, so that their children could be educated and learn English. The Shaben family history is part of a 100-year-old tradition, writer Guy Saddy said recently in an article in The Walrus magazine. It was "a made-in-Canada Islam," wrote Mr. Saddy, who is a nephew of Mr. Shaben. "A pliant and less conservative version of the faith that grew out of the western Prairie like a field of tall grass."

By the early 1920s, Edmonton harboured a small, tight-knit Arab community that did not shy away from their

adopted society. Even so, integration is not assimilation. In the midst of the Great Depression, a group of Muslim women, including members of the Shaben family, tapped into the community's spiritual yearning and initiated fundraising for what became Canada's first mosque. The Al Rashid Mosque was erected in Edmonton in 1938 thanks to contributions from Muslim families, Arab Christians and even some Jewish families. For decades, if you arrived in Edmonton and were Muslim, you went to the Al Rashid Mosque, no matter if you were a Sunni, Shiite or Ismaili. Today, Edmonton has several mosques and other Islamic prayers centres such as Ismaili jamaatkhanas. In the 1980s, the Al Rashid fell into disuse and was threatened with demolition. But as Globe and Mail reporter Stephanie Nolen chronicled in 2000, the mosque was saved by a feisty group of Muslim women who fought city hall – and a community they say was sometimes overtly racist – and had it declared a heritage building and moved to the Fort Edmonton Park historic site.

Mr. Shaben spent much of his youth at Al Rashid at a time when the mosque doubled as a community centre and a place of worship. Al Rashid hosted dances, dinners, interfaith suppers and community events as well as prayers. It was a place where children of immigrants could hang out even while exploring Canadian life and it was where Mr. Shaben first met his wife, Alma Saddy. In his late teens, he befriended a flamboyant and erudite British-born woman named Muriel Burton-Watkins who, along with her husband, sparked his enthusiasm for politics. They spent many Saturday afternoons passionately discussing philosophy, politics and religion.

After attending the University of Alberta, Mr. Shaben worked in various sales and marketing, and management positions. In 1960 he and Alma married. Over the next six years, they had five children. Seeking a secure and steady income, the family moved to High Prairie, a small farming town about 370 kilometres northwest of Edmonton, where they bought a general-goods store.

In 1975, after serving on town council, presiding over the local chamber of commerce, managing the senior hockey team, and serving as president of the constituency association for the Progressive Conservative Party, Mr. Shaben sought the Tory nomination for the riding of Lesser Slave Lake. He won, crediting the native community for his victory. While some constituents didn't feel comfortable with a Muslim as their MLA, the aboriginal population had no trouble electing a member of a minority group. In his acceptance speech, Mr. Shaben quoted the Arab poet, Kahlil Gibran, and was sworn into office with his hand on the Koran rather than the Bible.

For 15 years he led a vibrant and productive political life. He was appointed minister of housing and utilities under Progressive Conservative premier Peter Lougheed, and later served under Don Getty.

When expressed his views in cabinet meetings, "there was a remarkable quietness where everybody listened carefully to what Larry Shaben would say," Mr. Lougheed said. "His wisdom on a multitude of issues, was a very significant influence on the decisions of cabinet during that time."

Retiring from politics in 1989, Mr. Shaben moved back to Edmonton where he focused on forging connections between different Islamic traditions and between the Muslim and other faith communities. His legacy includes spearheading the establishment of the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities, the Islamic Academy of Edmonton and the endowed chairman of Islamic studies at U of A.

"He became my mentor," said Shayda Nanji, an ECOMC director. "He was a true leader. He'd say we're all here for the common good and you can park your egos at the door."

Mr. Shaben also played a founding role in the Phoenix Multi-Faith Society for Harmony, an interfaith organization dedicated to goodwill and dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Jews. Edmonton can claim a long tradition of support and respect between the city's Jewish and Muslim communities who often viewed themselves as having more in common than not. But as relations between the two groups in the Middle East deteriorated, local relations struggled too. On Oct. 31, 2000, two synagogues in the city were fire-bombed. Sol Rolingher, an Edmonton lawyer and Jewish community leader, recalls how the suspect was apprehended but then fled after being granted bail. The disappearance triggered near panic in the small Jewish community.

"That's when I turned to Larry," Mr. Rolingher said. "He was very open and drew together some senior members of the Muslim community and in the summer of 2001 they found him. He brought this person forward ... I said to Larry, 'You've done a great service to this community ... you can always count on me.'"

A month or two later, two jetliners crashed into the World Trade Center in New York. The reverberations were felt all the way to Edmonton. That very day, Mr. Rolingher and Mr. Shaben held a joint press conference to say: "We are Canadians first and religion should not be confused with politics."

The result, Mr. Rolingher said, was that Edmonton did not experience a major backlash against its Muslim community. Over the next four years the two worked closely, along with the Edmonton Police Service, to establish the Phoenix Society.

"Larry Shaben's name shone," Mr. Rolingher says. "He truly was the godfather – if there is such a role – of the [Muslim] community."

#### LARRY SHABEN

Larry Shaben was born March 20, 1935, in Hanna, Alta. He died Sept. 6, 2008, at the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton. He was 73, and suffered from cancer. He leaves his wife, Alma, his children Linda, Carol, Larry, James and Joan, his siblings Faye, Joan and Mary and numerous grandchildren. He was predeceased by his brother Edward.

Illustration

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