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It's tough going for Afghan New Yorkers

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Before the attack on the World Trade Center, Shareeff Obaidi never thought twice about telling high school classmates that he was born in Afghanistan.

The lanky teen now keeps quiet about his origins as he walks home past Afghani-owned businesses on a stretch of Kissena Blvd. in Flushing, Queens.

"Nowadays you can't make friends," said Obaidi, 16, a junior at Thomas Edison High School. "People think that you are a terrorist."

The small Afghani community in New York is struggling to cope with the aftermath of the attack, which has suddenly placed their homeland in the cross hairs of U.S. military might.

About 20,000 Afghani immigrants, mostly enemies of the fundamentalist Taliban regime, live in the New York area.

A chunk settled in a slice of Flushing, which they dubbed Kalatcha, slang for a Muslim neighborhood.

Shopkeeper Saeed Azimi cries when he sees images of the fiery attacks on the twin towers — and weeps again at footage of his dirt-poor homeland.

"If the U.S. gave me a uniform, I would go and fight the Taliban myself," said Azimi, 29.

Shoppers sipped green tea and picked through giant bins of nuts and dried fruit at his New Kouchi Supermarket. Next door, waiters prepared for dinner at the Afghan Kebab Palace.

But Azimi says his business is down by about a third since the terror attack, as women in particular are too frightened to venture out of their homes.

Sixteen-year-old Ashref Hotaki came to New York with his parents 12 years ago when he was just 4 years old. He wears baggy jeans, dreams of playing in the NBA and sounds like any average New York teenager.

But Hotaki now has to cope with a daily barrage of jokes and insults about the attack, especially since he attends Aviation High School and hopes to become a pilot.

"It's not even Afghani people who did this," said Hotaki. It's Osama Bin Laden."

Two police officers stood guard outside the marble Masjid Hazrat-I-Abubaker Sadiq mosque, where 5,000 Afghanis worship.

Imam Mohammad Sherzad says he's been telling his flock to look the other way if they are taunted or harassed, and pray for a better future for their homeland.

"We tell them to be patient, as Afghan-Americans," said Sherzad, 41. "These people are mourning, and we just explain to them that we are against terrorism, too."

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