

spirit

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES



*A Story About
Forgiveness*

PAGE 82

By Megan Feldman
Photography by Adam Voorhes

The **Heart** of Darkness

When Ples Felix's only grandson killed Azim Khamisa's only son, two lives were taken. And two friends were made.

AZIM KHAMISA smiles when he spots a round-faced man with spectacles striding into a sun-dappled courtyard on the campus of San Diego State University. Like

Khamisa, the man wears a pressed white shirt and polished black dress shoes. The two embrace. They're here to deliver an unusual talk, one that, over the years, they have presented to millions of students across the country. Minutes later, inside a warmly lit amphitheater, Khamisa takes the stage. "I'd like to introduce to you a very special man in my life," he says. "My brother, Ples Felix." When introducing Felix, he always uses that word: brother.

Khamisa and Felix, both in their 60s, are not related. Khamisa is the son of successful Persian merchants who settled in Kenya and practiced Sufi Islam; Felix was born to a blue-collar black family in Los Angeles and raised Baptist. Khamisa studied in London and became an international investment banker; Felix studied in New York and became an urban planner.

Yet their lives show striking similarities. For one, both men turned their backs on violence. As a young man, Khamisa fled persecution in Kenya at the hands of the Idi Amin regime in neighboring Uganda, eventually settling in the U.S. Felix left South Central L.A. by joining the United States Army and served two tours in Vietnam before foregoing a military career to attend college and pursue a civilian profession. On separate continents, they both learned to meditate—Khamisa from a Sufi friend in Africa; Felix from a Buddhist monk in Southeast Asia. Both made it a daily practice.

But none of these commonalities are what brought them together. They met 17 years ago after Felix's only grandson murdered Khamisa's only son.



Azim Khamisa, photographed outside his home in July 2012, found peace through forgiveness.

ON JANUARY 22, 1995, a Sunday, Azim Khamisa stood in the kitchen of his condo in La Jolla, California, straining to comprehend the words coming from the phone. "Your son ... shot ... dead ..." Surely there was a mistake. He hurried the detective off the phone and dialed his 20-year-old son Tariq's number. No answer. He called Tariq's fiancée, Jennifer. She answered but was crying so hard she could barely speak. Khamisa's knees buckled. He fell backward and hit his head on the refrigerator. As the phone crashed to the floor, he was enveloped by pain that he would forever describe as "a nuclear bomb detonating" in his heart.

Soon after, a close friend arrived. They sat in a daze at the dining room table. The artwork around them—a painting of an elephant, called "The Lone Tusker," that reminded Khamisa of

Kenya; another of a skier gliding down a snow-covered mountain that evoked memories of teaching Tariq to ski—suddenly seemed like artifacts from a past life. An investigator from the police department visited Khamisa's home to tell him that witnesses reported seeing four teens running from the car where Tariq, felled by a single bullet that tore through his heart and lungs, drowned in his own blood. The cops were searching for the boys.

The investigator left, and an emptiness settled over the room. Khamisa's friend shook his head. "I hope they catch those bastards and fry them," he said. He was thinking of his own son, who was 12, and how he would feel if anyone harmed him.

Khamisa's response was slow and startling. "I don't feel that way," he said. "There were victims at both ends of that gun."

The words rolled out of his mouth and when he heard them, the meaning rang true. He felt they came from God.

ON THE MORNING of January 23, 1995, Ples Felix sat in his car outside a modest apartment building in the middle-class San Diego neighborhood of North Park, 15 miles southeast of La Jolla. Minutes earlier, he'd called the police to report that his 14-year-old grandson, Tony Hicks, had run away and was holed up here, inside the apartment where the boy's friend Hakeem lived with his mother. Before watching the officers disappear through the front door, Felix warned them there were probably gang members inside.

Tony had stopped doing his homework and started ditching school. Felix, whom Tony called "Daddy," had tried to talk sense into his

grandson. But over the weekend he'd returned home to find Tony gone—along with Felix's 12-gauge shotgun. A brief note read, "Daddy, I love you. But I've run away." By Monday, Felix had been able to track him to this apartment complex.

Now, as he sat across the street, he prayed this would go smoothly, since, like many people from South Central, he'd grown up amid unsettling violence and hardship. At age 16, Felix had fathered a child—his daughter, Loeta. When Loeta was 16, she gave birth to Felix's grandson, Tony, who spent his first eight years in gang-ridden chaos, which included witnessing, at age 8, his 16-year-old cousin's remains being removed by the county coroner after the teenager was killed by rival gang members.

Loeta thought Tony would stand a better chance under the wing of his grandfather, so she shipped him off to the comparatively gentle environs of San Diego. With Felix's

guidance and structure, Tony went from struggling as a student to earning B's—until adolescence, when rules began to grate and the approval of Tony's friends took precedence over school and family.

In his car, Felix's prayers were interrupted when the San Diego PD reappeared. As an officer led Tony away in cuffs, the boy engaged in nervous banter. Tony still resembled that imp who, before drifting off to sleep, used to whisper to his grandfather, "Good night, Daddy." Felix took one last look and drove to work.

That afternoon, he was sitting at his desk in downtown San Diego when a homicide detective called. Tony wasn't merely being held as a runaway; he was a prime suspect in a murder investigation. A tipster had led police to Tony and his friends, who apparently had dubbed themselves "The Black Mob." The facts would soon fall into place: After fleeing his home on Saturday, Tony spent the day with Hakeem and Black Mob ringleader Antoine "Q-Tip" Pittman, playing video games and smoking weed. Later that evening, they called in an order to a nearby pizzeria, with the intent to rob the deliveryman.

Tony, who'd been bestowed the nickname "Bone" by the group, slipped a stolen 9mm semiautomatic handgun into his waistband

and walked with Q-Tip and two other teen gang members to a Louisiana Street apartment complex, where the pizza was being delivered. When they arrived, Tariq Khamisa—a college student who'd recently taken a part-time job at DiMille's Italian Restaurant to earn spending money—was leaving the building, still carrying the pizza. As the boys demanded that he hand it over, Tony drew his gun. Tariq refused, and clambered into his beige Volkswagen.

"Bust him, Bone!" Q-Tip shouted, as Tariq tried to pull away. Tony aimed and squeezed. The car rolled to a stop. The boys ran. As the blood drained from Tariq's body, a father and grandfather were unknowingly drawn into a future that they never could have imagined.

A PARENT'S GREATEST nightmare is losing a child. When that loss is the result of a criminal act, we expect a turbulent reaction. Khamisa's behavior after his son's murder was so far from the norm that it made headlines. Ten months after Tariq's death, Khamisa told *The San Diego Union-Tribune* that he forgave the alleged killer. Unlike most victims' families, who track a case's every twist in pursuit of justice, Khamisa told the prosecuting attorney that he

preferred to leave the legal maneuvering to the state and focus on violence prevention.

Within a year of the murder, Khamisa started the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, which teaches the virtues of nonviolence to San Diego middle schoolers and young people nationwide. TKF raises \$1.5 million annually for educational, mentoring, and community service programs that target at-risk youth. The curriculum's centerpiece features Khamisa and his surprise ally Ples Felix sharing their story at school assemblies. Educators who have opened their doors to the duo say that gang activity and discipline problems have dipped as a result. TKF has reached nearly 1 million kids in San Diego County through live presentations, plus another 8 million through Khamisa and Felix's visits to schools in Australia, Europe, and Canada, and broadcasts on Channel One News (shown in schools across the U.S.). After launching TKF, Khamisa partnered with the nonprofit National Youth Advocate Program to create CANEI, or Constant and Never Ending Improvement, a program that teaches nonviolence and individual responsibility to young offenders and their families. It currently operates in seven cities. Forgiveness is key to both programs, and in addition to lecturing on the topic in cities around the world, Khamisa leads two-day workshops for individuals, therapists, and community groups entitled "Forgiveness: The Crown Jewel of Personal Freedom."

Forgiveness has, for centuries, been preached by prophets and inspirational leaders. Nelson Mandela popularized one of Khamisa's favorite quotes: "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."

As it turns out, equating resentment with poison isn't a stretch. Nursing a grudge means holding onto anger, and prolonged anger spikes heart rate, lowers immune response, and floods the brain with neurotransmitters that impede problem solving and stir depression. In multiple studies, forgiveness has been shown to provide benefits such as lowered blood pressure and increased optimism, says Dr. Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, an ongoing series of workshops and research projects at Stanford University. Having developed ways to teach forgiveness in various places, including war-ravaged countries such

Nelson Mandela popularized one of Khamisa's favorite quotes: "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."



Tariq, Remembered
From left: With his sister, Tasreen, on vacation in 1986; in a picture taken by his fiancée, Jennifer; in Kenya, six months before his death.



as Sierra Leone, Luskin asserts that anyone—from jilted spouses to widows who have lost husbands to terrorism—can heal.

“When you don’t forgive, you release all the chemicals of the stress response,” Luskin says. “Each time you react, adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine enter the body. When it’s a chronic grudge, you could think about it 20 times a day, and those chemicals limit creativity; they limit problem solving. Cortisol and norepinephrine cause your brain to enter what we call ‘the no-thinking zone,’ and over time, they lead you to feel helpless and like a victim. When you forgive, you wipe all of that clean.”

WIPING THE SLATE clean isn’t easy when it means forgiving the person who killed your son. The day Khamisa and his family buried Tariq in Vancouver, where both sets of Tariq’s grandparents lived, it was cold and rainy. Khamisa chanted prayers in a mosque with thousands of worshippers. In accordance with tradition, he climbed down into a muddy grave to receive his son’s body. A group of men lowered Tariq down. As Khamisa held his son for the last time, his feet sinking into the mud and rain pouring over his head, saying goodbye seemed so abhorrent that he lingered for a few long moments.

In the weeks that followed, Khamisa contemplated suicide. Just months before, he’d been going from one international business trip to the next and working 100-hour weeks; now he could barely rise from bed. Things like showering and eating lunch seemed to be enormous tasks. He couldn’t sleep, so he began meditating for four hours a day instead of just one. On a chilly day, three months after Tariq’s death, Khamisa drove to a cabin near California’s Mammoth Mountain. He hoped a few days away might help him break the grief that seemed to be drowning him.

When he arrived he built a fire. He gazed into the flames and memories surfaced: Tariq collecting stones at the beach; Tariq laughing at some clever joke, his joy contagious and in contrast with his father’s serious mien; Tariq asking for help balancing his checkbook. Khamisa had always loved numbers, acing accounting and preparing to run his father’s Peugeot dealership in his 20s. But Tariq had little interest in business. He loved music and art. Their differences caused friction, but the last time they saw each other—over breakfast, 12



Forgiveness, Khamisa likes to say, is a process, not a destination, and it doesn’t mean skipping grief. As the poet Rumi wrote, “The cure for the pain is the pain.”

days before the murder—they amiably traded stories about their divergent interests. Tariq said his recent trip to Kenya to visit family had strengthened his resolve to become a National Geographic photographer, and that he and his fiancée Jennifer—both art majors at SDSU—were considering moving to New York City.

Mostly, in the cloistered quiet of the cabin, Khamisa felt sadness, but anger, too—anger that he wasn’t somehow able to protect Tariq; anger that he had been killed over something as trivial as a pizza; anger, most pointedly, at his adopted country. How absurd that he’d left the chaos and violence of Africa only to see his son slain on the streets of America! Before, news of shootings seemed faraway and inconsequential, but now he applied his laser-focused business mind to sociology, obsessively studying the dire statistics of America’s street wars. His son and the boy who killed him were victims of something dark and sinister, something for which every American—including Khamisa—was responsible.

Maybe this was what the Sufi teacher had meant. Weeks before Khamisa undertook his retreat, a friend and spiritual guide told him that a soul was earthbound for 40 days before departing to a new level of consciousness, but that the journey could be hindered by unreconciled feelings of loved ones who remain behind.

“I recommend you break the paralysis of grief and find a good deed to do in Tariq’s name,” the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 89

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 88

teacher told him. “Compassionate acts undertaken in the name of the departed are spiritual currency, which will transfer to Tariq’s soul and help speed his journey.”

That was it. Khamisa wouldn’t just study violence, he would return to San Diego, consult the best minds he knew, and devise a plan to change the status quo. Somehow, he also knew that if he didn’t reach out to the killer’s family and forgive them—maybe even invite them to join his crusade—he’d forever be a victim of his anguish. When he drove back to the California coast at the end of the weekend on Mammoth Mountain, it was with renewed purpose.

IN MAY 1995, a judge—in accordance with a new state law that allowed 14- and 15-year-olds to be prosecuted and sentenced as adults rather than juveniles—ruled that Tony, now 15, would be tried as an adult. Tony’s attorney notified Felix and asked if he would talk to his grandson. Tony was still posturing as a street tough (during interrogations he’d referred to Tariq as a “stupid pizza man” who should have just handed over the food), which wouldn’t serve him well in court. He faced 25 years to life if, in advance of a trial, he pled guilty to first-degree murder, or 45 years to life if he chose the trial route.

At juvenile hall, Tony sat sullen and silent in his blue jumpsuit while his attorney laid out his options, then left grandfather and grandson alone. Felix handed Tony an orange, and the boy began to cry—maybe because it reminded him of his grandfather’s ritual of talking over fruit, or maybe because the gravity of his predicament had finally hit him. As if he were 5 again, he jumped into Felix’s lap. “Daddy, I’m so sorry for what I did,” he sobbed. “I never

wanted to hurt anybody, I was just angry, stupid.” He grew quiet after a moment and returned to his seat. He took the orange, peeled it, and gave half to his grandfather. Then, with his body shaking, he calmly spoke like a man twice his age: “I have to take responsibility for what I did.” Tony, the first juvenile prosecuted as an adult in California, took the plea bargain and was sentenced to 25 years to life.

THROUGH ALL the complex legal wrangling, Felix prayed for a way to help Tariq’s family. And the invitation came at a wrenching time. Many North Park residents wanted Tony to receive the maximum penalty, and some, upon learning that the accused killer’s grandfather was managing a local redevelopment effort, demanded the city fire him from the project. The mayor refused, but the attacks had taken a toll.

Felix wore a suit and tie on the day—November 3, 1995—he met Khamisa for the first time. It was a moment Felix had anticipated for months. As he shook Khamisa’s hand in Tony’s attorney’s office, he said, “If there’s anything I can do to be a support to you and your family, please call on me.” He added that Khamisa had been in his daily prayers and meditations.

It struck Khamisa as fortuitous. He immediately felt close to this man. “We both lost a child,” he told Felix, before detailing the particulars of his newly formed foundation and its goal of preventing children from committing violent crimes. Felix felt a weight start to lift.

A week later, Khamisa held one of the foundation’s first meetings at his condo. His parents had come in from Vancouver. Also there was his ex-wife, Almas, and their daughter: Tariq’s sister, Tasreen. Felix imagined the grief he would walk

into at that meeting, and prepared with more meditation than usual.

Inside, some 50 people were gathered, and Khamisa introduced Felix to his parents. His father was frail but fixed Felix with an open expression, accepting his condolences and placing a hand on his arm in welcome. Khamisa’s mother, a devout woman who for decades served tea daily during 4 a.m. prayers at her mosque, said, “We’re glad you are with us.” Almas took Felix’s hand, and as he looked into her eyes, he could feel her trembling.

When he was invited to speak to the group, Felix glanced at some notes he’d made, then folded and returned them to his pocket. Looking around, he saw people of all ages—Khamisa’s

For more information about the Tariq Khamisa Foundation or to support its educational and mentoring programs dedicated to ending youth violence in the U.S. and around the world, visit tkf.org.

friends, colleagues, neighbors. He was committed, he told them, to “support anything that promotes the precious value of our future: our children.”

FORGIVENESS, Khamisa likes to say, is a process, not a destination, and it doesn’t mean skipping grief. As the Sufi poet Rumi wrote, “The cure for the pain is the pain.” Even as he spent his days meditating and building the foundation’s programs with his daughter, Tasreen, Khamisa operated under a shroud of sadness. One evening while out with friends, nearly four years after the murder, someone told a joke, and he laughed—for the first time since Tariq’s death.

In the summer of 2000, five years after the crime, Khamisa traveled to California State Prison near Sacramento for his first one-on-one encounter with Tony. He had spent thousands of hours meditating to prepare, but as he made his way through the prison’s maze of dim hallways, his heart was pounding. When he reached the visiting area, Felix rose to greet him, with Tony by his side. Khamisa shook the young man’s hand and looked into his eyes. The three of them made small talk about prison life and ate some candy, then Felix left them alone.

Tony was fidgety at first but grew more composed as they began to talk. He struck Khamisa as much more polite and well-spoken than the teen who had once called his son a “stupid pizza man.” Khamisa wanted to hear about Tariq’s last moments. Tony said he didn’t recall him saying anything. He described the scene and Q-Tip’s order to shoot. And then he said something strange. As he squeezed the trigger, he told Khamisa, he saw a bright white light that came from the sky and illuminated only him and Tariq.

Combined with the coroner's description of the unlikely, perfect path the single bullet took through Tariq's vitals, this luminous vision reinforced Khamisa's conviction that his son's death was destiny and should serve a larger purpose.

Khamisa offered Tony his forgiveness, told him that he looked forward to his release from prison, expressed his hope that he would

join Felix and him at the foundation, and hugged him goodbye.

WITHIN a few months, Khamisa and Tony began writing.

Khamisa keeps their letters in a thick folder in his home office, where the walls are covered with framed photos (Tasreen's wedding, Tariq on the African savanna), and

award certificates. Tony's letters are handwritten. Khamisa's are typed. The correspondence touches on books, health, and family, with Khamisa commending Tony for completing his GED, and Tony wishing Khamisa a happy Father's Day. In one letter, Tony thanks Khamisa for keeping him informed about "the great work that you and my grandfather have turned this around to be." In another, he describes Khamisa's forgiveness as "a shock" that goes "against what I believed to be the natural order of things."

Khamisa and Felix insist that the prison meeting was a turning point for Tony. Before it, he repeatedly told his grandfather that he believed he would die in prison. After it, he seemed more focused on school and began reading voraciously. Yet in 2003, he pled guilty to battery on a prison guard and weapons possession—a lapse that added 10 years to his sentence and got him transferred to Salinas Valley State Prison, a maximum security facility. "They're not sent to [Salinas] because they're behaving well," notes one supervising district attorney. "That he had a weapon and was assaulting staff won't bode well for him when he goes before the parole board."

Khamisa was saddened by the news of Tony's backsliding, but he continued to correspond with him—and even to lobby for his freedom. In 2005, he wrote to then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to request that Tony's sentence be commuted. "With Tony outside the prison walls and helping the foundation," Khamisa wrote, "the world will be safer than it is now." He also proposed that 14- and 15-year-olds convicted of violent crimes in adult court be eligible for gubernatorial commutation after ten years. In reply from the governor's office, he received a "standard, non-committal letter."

Khamisa remains unshakable in his commitment to forgiveness as a way to heal and serve others. “There’s no quality of life being a victim,” he often says. His foundation hires Americorps members to mentor high-risk students in order to reduce misbehavior, since kids with attendance and discipline problems are more likely to be expelled for violence. In track-

ing 155 San Diego Unified School District middle schoolers, TKF found that the group’s number of behavioral referrals to administrators decreased by 63 percent.

While TKF’s staffers teach forgiveness, living it, they say, can be challenging. Mayra Nunez, TKF’s 32-year-old mentorship supervisor, lost her older brother in a drive-by shooting when she was

12. The shooter was never apprehended. When a guidance counselor took Nunez to see Khamisa speak a decade ago, she couldn’t understand his message. “This man is nuts,” she said to herself. Still intrigued, she talked with Khamisa and wound up speaking at his Violence Impact Forums. “It took me 10 years of working at TKF, but I can honestly say I forgive that person,” she says. “Part of that was being tired of living with hatred and revenge.” She echoes Khamisa: Forgiveness doesn’t condone an act and isn’t for the offender, but is “a gift you give yourself.”

Even Tasreen’s mother has found solace. “It was painful to talk about losing my son,” Almas says, recalling the times in 2005 when she first began speaking at TKF events. “But the reaction I got was healing. Students would hug me, write letters, and say, ‘I promise I will never hold a gun or join a gang.’ That meant a lot.”

The contribution of individuals to society is integral to both TKF and CANEI, the the post-adjudication program for juvenile offenders. CANEI is based on restorative justice, an approach that strives to heal victims, rehabilitate offenders, and repair crime’s damage to communities. CANEI requires offenders to apologize to and ask forgiveness of their victims, then to repay their debt through community service. A review of 11 studies involving more than 2,000 offenders found that those who participated in such programs showed recidivism rates 27 percent lower than the general population.

IN THE DARK auditorium of San Diego’s Correia Middle School on a morning in April of this year, Khamisa imagines that his son is with him backstage. Felix almost always joins Khamisa at these assemblies, but today he

was called away for a family emergency, so it's just a father and the memory of his son. He feels closest to Tariq while talking with kids, maybe because Tariq loved children and wanted a large family. Khamisa can hear a school administrator introducing him. "Ready, Tariq?" he says to his son's ever-present spirit as he walks onto the stage and into the light.

He starts by showing a video about Tariq's murder and his response to it, and throughout the room the soft sounds of feet shuffling and kids whispering immediately cease. "Tariq is already dead and gone forever, and Tony is in prison for a very long time, so we're not here just to share their story," he tells the children. "We're here for you. Because every one

of you is a very important person, and it would break my heart if any of you ended up dead, like my son, or in prison, like Tony." The students sit stock-still and silent.

"How many of you have lost a brother or sister as a result of violence?" he asks. Roughly a third of the few hundred students raise their hands. "And how many of you would want revenge if a brother or sister was killed?" Nearly every hand shoots up.

He says he understands, but counters, "Let me ask you this: Would revenge bring Tariq back?"

Several students want to know what happened to Q-Tip, the 18-year-old who ordered Tony to pull the trigger. Khamisa tells them he is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

And Tariq's fiancée, how is she?

Jennifer never recovered from Tariq's death, Khamisa explains, and she began abusing drugs. She overdosed and died at 27. "See," he says, "that's the ripple effect of violence ... And do you think Tony's homeboys visit him in prison?"

"No," the children murmur.

"That's right. I visit him, his grandfather visits him, his mother visits him." Khamisa pauses and focuses on the sea of young faces. "I look forward to the day Tony can join us. Maybe he'll be speaking to your children."

Khamisa's vision for Tony may be an unrealistic dream. Yet it's his hope for these children, for the chance to prevent even one of them from becoming another Tony, that drives him to rise each morning and retell the painful story of his son's death. It's his prayer that his suffering and his story might be able to change a school, a city, a country—maybe even the world.

Megan Feldman's stories have appeared in Details, Glamour, and 5280: The Denver Magazine. You can visit her at meganfeldman.com.