

ALBANY: Albany woman walking in show of support for imprisoned imam

BY SARA FOSS Gazette Reporter

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Lynne Jackson has been training, but not for a triathlon, or a marathon. She was training for a 133-mile walk to Binghamton in the hot July sun. Her walk, which she has dubbed a “journey for justice,” began with a rally and march in Albany on Friday; by Monday, she had made it to Cobleskill, where she planned to spend the night.

“I’ve been going for really long walks [to get ready],” Jackson said. “For 10-mile walks, 13-mile walks.”

Jackson is walking in a show of support for Yassin Aref, the Albany imam convicted on terrorism charges in 2006.

Aref has a base of supporters in the Capital Region who believe he is innocent. Last month, they announced Aref would file an appeal in mid-July to present to federal Judge Thomas McAvoy in Binghamton, who presided over his trial. The motion, known as a 2255, can be filed directly by a prisoner if new evidence is found that may materially affect his conviction.

The motion has been filed, with Aref requesting his conviction be overturned and a new trial ordered.

“This 2255 shows dramatic new evidence, and I felt like we needed to do something dramatic to emphasize it,” said Jackson, an Albany resident well-known in the Capital Region for her involvement with the environmental advocacy group Save the Pine Bush. “I want the judge to know that we in Albany have not forgotten Yassin Aref.”

She said she will present McAvoy with a petition asking him to seriously consider reopening Aref’s case.

Jackson said she has been joined by friends and other supporters on her walk, though when she was contacted Monday, she was alone and getting ready to take a nap. She said the hot weather might prompt her to alter her schedule, because it is forcing her to take long breaks during the afternoon.

“It is really hot out,” Jackson said, noting her original plan was to walk 13 miles a day and arrive in Binghamton on July 23. “It becomes really difficult to walk later in the day.”

The bulk of Jackson’s trip is along Route 7. Each night, she stays with people who have volunteered to host her, a mix of peace activists and Quakers, she said.

“Route 7 is so astonishingly beautiful,” she added.

Aref, a Kurdish refugee from Iraq who came to Albany in 1999, was arrested in a 2004 FBI sting, along with Albany pizza shop owner Mohammed Hossain. The case remains controversial today for many reasons, including the

FBI's use of an undercover informant with a criminal background, authorities' decision to focus so much energy on two men with clean records and because the terrorist plot itself was a fictional scenario created by the agency.

In the FBI's sting, the informant offered Hossain the opportunity to make some money by laundering proceeds from the sale of a missile to a terrorist group. Aref entered the picture months later, when he agreed to witness the transaction. However, prosecutors have not wavered in their assertion that Aref and Hossain are dangerous men.

In an interview with The Gazette last year, federal prosecutor William Pericak, who prosecuted Aref and Hossain on behalf of the United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of New York, said that because Aref's name and phone number were found at three different Iraqi locations associated with the terrorist group Ansar al-Islam, "it would have been criminal" not to investigate him.

Aref and Jackson email each other regularly, and he wrote a short note about her walk. He said he wishes he could be there "and walk with you. As you know, I play soccer and I am good in walking and even in running." He said he had planned to run "in the yard, every day for the same distance you do, but now Ramadan is here, which may slow me down."

According to Aref's supporters, his new appeal is the result of a Freedom of Information Act request he made in 2011. They said Aref uncovered evidence showing that as early as December 2002, the FBI thought he was really an Al Qaeda agent named Mohammed Yasin and that Yassin Muhiddin Aref was one of his pseudonyms.

The 2255 motion states it is probable "the misidentification of Aref caused the case to become a priority in Washington, D.C. ... Petitioner Aref was thus originally targeted based on the FBI erroneously linking him to Al Qaeda."

Aref has exhausted his formal appeals. He is currently serving a 15-year sentence at a low-security federal prison in Loretto, Pa. His release date is 2018, and he is expected to be deported upon release.

He has always said he is not a terrorist and was never a member of a terrorist group.

Jackson is blogging about her work at <http://projectsalam.wordpress.com/>