

Atheists, humanists take up slain Muslim's cause

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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(RNS) Atheists and other nonbelievers have pitched in more than \$20,000 to support the charity work of one of the three Muslim students slain in North Carolina last week, allegedly by a man who harbored anti-theist sentiments.

One of the slain students, Deah Shaddy Barakat, 23, was a graduate dental student at the University of North Carolina and planned to travel with the Syrian American Medical Society Foundation to Syrian refugee camps. He was shot and killed February 10 along with his wife, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, 21, and sister-in-law, Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, 19, in what police say may have started as a neighborhood parking dispute.

Barakat's cause has now been adopted by atheists, humanists, and other nonbelievers who are raising funds for SAMS in his name. The drive has so far collected \$20,125 a week after the killings.

"We are very happy with the response," said Dale McGowan, executive director of Foundation Beyond Belief, a humanist organization that encourages giving among nonbelievers. "This is about the response we would get for a natural disaster."

As of Tuesday, Barakat's crowd-sourced fundraising campaign had raised nearly \$450,000; the original goal had been \$20,000.

The idea for the Foundation Beyond Belief fundraiser came from Todd Stiefel, a humanist activist and philanthropist who lives in the Chapel Hill area. McGowan said he and Stiefel talked soon after the shootings to explore how the atheist and humanist communities should respond. The man accused in the killings, Craig Stephen Hicks, 46, reportedly made numerous anti-theistic statements to family and neighbors and had links to popular atheist websites on his Facebook page.

“One of the things I think other worldview communities have dealt with in the past is what to do when a portion of your community does something inhumane or violent, something that does not reflect your values as a member of that community,” McGowan said. “We wanted to say this guy may have been an atheist but the atheist community absolutely disowns this action, and we wanted to make it clear we recognize the victims as victims and make a gesture of healing.”

Before his death, Barakat recorded a video seeking donations for a SAMS project called “Refugee Smiles.” In it, he announced his intention to travel to Turkey with SAMS this summer to perform dental work among the Syrian refugees, especially children. He was seeking donations for toothpaste, toothbrushes and other dental supplies to take on the trip.

That made raising funds for SAMS a natural choice, McGowan said.

“It felt like we could to some degree make something good come out of this horrible event,” he said.