Harvard University students are going to be studying Palos Heights this fall. A case study titled “A Mosque in Palos Heights,” based on real events in that city in 2000, has been developed by Harvard’s Pluralism Project, which studies America’s changing religious diversity to better understand its impact on society.

In 2000, the Al Salam Mosque Foundation signed a contract to buy the Reformed Church, which was planning to move and build a new, larger building. The ensuing public uproar generated national media attention, charges of religious bigotry, and a town hall meeting that produced both stirring speeches promoting tolerance and demeaning remarks about Muslims.

At the center of the controversy was Dean Koldenhoven, the mayor of Palos Heights, who is the key figure in Harvard’s case study.

While the case study attempts to reflect opinions expressed by all of the major participants, Ellie Pierce, the senior researcher on the project and its author, admits that Koldenhoven became the “protagonist of the story.”
“Every good story has to have a protagonist to engage the reader,” Pierce said in a telephone interview from Cambridge, Mass. “And all of the personal conflicts involving the mayor—his deep sense of Christian values; the Constitution; his belief in doing what was best for his community as his neighbors ridiculed him, and the death of his son at a critical point in the dispute—all help people identify with this story.”

The case study has two parts, although a third is in development. Case Study A basically develops the background, identifies the origins of the controversy and recreates the community debate as accurately as possible given its limited format. Case Study B details the aftermath of the conflict.

Pierce used meeting minutes from Palos Heights City Council meetings, newspaper articles, television video tape and personal interviews with religious leaders, political leaders and private citizens to paint a word picture of events at the time.

When I asked Pierce why she picked Palos Heights for the case study, she said, “I think I actually came across one of your newspaper stories on the Internet at the time.” A column of mine is quoted in the case study. Pierce said she spent seven years putting the case study together and, although I’m sure some people (opponents of the mosque) would say it isn’t purely objective, I found it to be an accurate representation of events.

“What I found most interesting is how many people, on both sides of the controversy, were really motivated not by racism, but by a genuine belief that they were trying to do what was best for their community,” Pierce said. “I tried to communicate that in the case study.”

Students will eventually be asked to role play, assuming roles of various characters involved in the conflict. They will be asked to identify ways in which the dispute might have been resolved with less community turmoil.

The case studies will eventually be provided to other universities and the Pluralism Project will use them to train religious and political leaders across the country.

Pierce admits a fascination with Koldenhoven, a complex character. In the city’s official newsletter in 1999 he wrote a Christmas message extolling the virtues of Palos Heights as a religious community. He said he had visited all 11 churches in Palos Heights and, he wrote, although all are different they all have one thing in common. “[W]e all worship the same Lord Jesus Christ, whose birthday we celebrate . . . .”

During a training session with interns at Harvard this summer, some of the students were dismayed the mayor would use his government position to promote religion. Yet, it becomes clear in letters Koldenhoven wrote to religious leaders in Palos Heights that his religious beliefs, as much as his belief in the First Amendment, led him to defend the mosque.
“Love thy neighbor,” Koldenhoven states time and again, is a core value of the Christian church. How can a person reject people of another faith because they are different and still contend they are good Christians?

The mosque foundation eventually withdrew its bid for the church. Koldenhoven, along with almost every other majority political figure at the time, would lose his bid for reelection. He would eventually be honored with a John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award.

And years later Orland Park would allow a mosque to be built. “That will be Part C of the case study,” Pierce said. “I believe the lessons of Palos Heights led to that result.”