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Language of food

Interfaith teens bond over falafel

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by Richard Greenberg, Associate Editor



High school students Aji Drammeh, a Muslim, left, and Leah Hollander, a Jew, prepare food for the homeless during a recent interfaith program for teens in Silver Spring.

In her quest to deflate religious stereotypes and promote cross-cultural understanding, Shayna Solomon had attended interfaith dialogue sessions -- but something was missing.

"I didn't see people my age there," said the 17-year-old Rockville resident and member of Conservative Tifereth Israel Congregation in the District.

The average teen, she figured, would probably find more meaning in a hands-on interfaith activity than a mere discussion. Better yet, if the activity involved helping others.

Solomon's vision became a reality Sunday, as about 20 local high school students -- Jews, Christians and Muslims -- gathered in Silver Spring to make Middle Eastern food for the homeless.

Known as "Breaking Bread, Building Bridges," the get-together marked the formation of a new group aimed at creating common ground for high school students from various religious backgrounds.

The new organization, called SAFE (Social Action for Everyone), was co-founded by Solomon and fellow Jewish students Sarah Schwartz, 17, of Silver Spring and Danny Roza, 17, of Hagerstown, as well as 17-year-old Nicole Turchi, a Muslim student from Silver Spring.

Solomon, Schwartz and Roza were all prize-winners in an essay contest held earlier this year that explored "pathways to peace and understanding between the three Abrahamic faith traditions -- Judaism, Christianity and Islam."

Noting that the three entrants had offered similar bridge-building proposals in their essays, the contest sponsor, the Fund for the Future of Our Children, encouraged them to combine forces and provided the group with a \$2,000 grant to develop interfaith programs, including Sunday's Breaking Bread. (Turchi joined the group later.)

"We just ran with it," said Solomon.

"It's wonderful because it grew out of their hearts," added Avidah Shashaani, FFOC president. "I was so gratified and pleased with how they grasped the concept of interfaith understanding. What better way to promote that than by cooking Middle Eastern food?"

Participants in Sunday's get-together assembled at a community center to prepare (nearly from scratch) falafel sandwiches topped with hummus and a mixture of diced tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and onions commonly known among Jews as

Israeli salad -- or as Solomon called it, Middle Eastern salad. "It's only fair," she explained.

The students assembled in teams to chop vegetables, smash garlic cloves and puree chickpeas for the hummus. (The falafel balls were pre-cooked.) "I feel like I'm on Top Chef now," Turchi squealed as she peeled a garlic clove. "I'm very hands-on and do-it-yourself. There's more output and energy if you're doing something rather than just talking about it and musing. There are so many misconceptions to overcome."

(Earlier in the afternoon, with the students divided into small discussion groups, Turchi recalled a disquieting incident that occurred several years ago. When she casually informed an acquaintance that she was a Muslim, the listener shot back: "I can't hang out with you; you're a terrorist.'")

"There are a lot of misconceptions," added Roza, fresh from chopping duty. "Through interactions like this, with people getting together to give back to the community, those walls can be broken down."

Nearby, Leah Hollander and Aji Drammeh, 17-year-olds from Silver Spring with vastly different backgrounds, were hard at work, side-by-side, preparing the Middle Eastern salad.

"We have more in common than we realize, and the cooking's really fun," said Hollander, a Jew.

"It's good to mix together and meet new people," added Drammeh, a Muslim, who was wearing a headscarf.

Solomon's father, Jonathan, who was pitching in at a prep station, was asked to assess the value of Sunday's session.

"If we don't know each other, we will fear each other rather than cooperate with each other," responded Solomon, 56, who said the teens provided a valuable perspective. "Kids see what's wrong with the world and what needs to be done. They have a fresh approach and we need to listen to them."