

Ocean County Diversity Initiative

By: Victoria Ford



Reaching Across Faith Traditions.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford.

The nonprofit organization RAFT, or Reaching Across Faith Traditions, was born, indirectly, out of a book club. The Daughters of Abraham Women's Interfaith Book Group contacted Lisa Gertner, a Trustee of the Ocean County Jewish Federation, in the hopes of filling out their membership of Muslims, Christians and Jews.

In their readings and discussions, Gertner said, what they all discovered right away was not how different they were but rather how much they all had in common.

An outgrowth of the Federation is the Ocean County Diversity Initiative, formed last winter, for neighbors of different backgrounds to come together and learn about

each other and forge bonds of understanding and respect. The Initiative's goal is to unite the many and various local religious, ethnic and governmental groups in positive action.

The underlying theme is different people can face the same hate, called xenophobia, or fear of the "other," Gertner explained. Through the Initiative is how Gertner met Mona Khan, and together they would organize RAFT, which seeks "to create a vibrant community that fosters respect, appreciation and friendship through shared knowledge of all faiths." After all, Gertner reasoned, the country was built by so-called foreigners. Better (and more patriotic, even) to embrace each other as neighbors than to divide along lines of spiritual faith or religious practices.

Gertner double majored at Rutgers University in French and multicultural communications. She converted to Judaism for her husband. Khan is a Muslim who emigrated from Pakistan. In their view, people who come to the United States have the right, both, to hold on to their heritage and to assimilate safely.

Fittingly, RAFT's tagline is "providing safe passage to a more peaceful world."

RAFT held its first public event at Ocean County College in April, an interfaith dialogue and panel discussion with local scholars titled "How Religion Influences Women's Dress: Empowerment, Expression or Oppression?" – for which more than 80 people showed up.

The main idea that came across was cultures in which women are expected to cover their bodies and heads are not necessarily oppressive. Or, if they are, Khan offered, how is it any different in reverse, for women of the Western world, who may face societal pressure to bare more skin, instead of less? Is that not, perhaps, just oppression in another form?

"We wanted to take an academic approach," Gertner explained, so the panelists included Drs. Cynthia Ninivaggi, Mary Paula Cancienne, and Johann Vento, of Georgian Court University in Lakewood; Professor Atiya Aftab, of Rutgers University; and Rabbi Dr. Lisa Malik of Aberdeen.

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Its second event was a screening of “David” on July 13, a story of two boys, two faiths (Muslim and Orthodox Jew), one friendship, set in Brooklyn’s Bay Ridge and Borough Park.

“Through an act of good faith, Daud, the 11-year-old son of a conservative Imam at the local mosque, befriends a group of young Yeshiva students who assume he is one of their own. Unable to resist the joys of newfound camaraderie, Daud (now David) plays along, developing a particularly close bond with a boy named Yoav. But with the inevitable unraveling of Daud’s well-intentioned web of deceit, he and Yoav must confront complex emotions shaped by the realities of their related but very different cultures.

“Written by Joel Fendelman and Patrick Daly, David avoids stereotypes and predictability. Instead the film sensitively explores the dynamics of family and tradition that at once unite us and set us apart. A catalyst for self-reflection and discussion.”

With seven members now and multiple events under its belt, RAFT’s focus is on how to make a difference in a broader sense, by attracting younger audiences, or speaking directly to those who don’t already feel the way RAFT members feel.

As Khan put it, how can we reach those who need their minds opened? Otherwise, “People fill in the blanks with whatever suits them.” Sometimes all it takes is a meaningful one-on-one interaction, the women agreed. As they have found, it’s much harder to hate an individual than a group.

But no matter how the message of inclusion gets spread, Khan wants to convey with it a sense of urgency, to shake things up. Her plea to the public is, “Come out. Speak up. Vote.” In other words, don’t allow ignorance to proliferate; be involved in solutions.

RAFT gatherings always have a food component, so cultural dishes might be shared. Getting people sitting down around a table tends to make them more apt to have conversations, more willing to ask questions.

Currently they are investigating St. Joe’s church in Toms River as a venue for a food-related event, maybe in November, around a theme of gratitude, and again in the spring near the time of Passover and Ramadan.

“I have a feeling it will be one of those things where people start to get familiar with the name RAFT, and it will make its presence known, and they will decide to check it out,” Khan said.

“I think we’ve tapped into something to fill the need for a lot of people,” Gertner said.

The women were looking forward to a strategy meeting to firm up dates to begin planning. The turnouts have been encouraging, Khan said. Gertner said she has been pleased by the enthusiasm she has received from participants at events who have remarked, “Wow, we had no idea we had so much in common.”

Funding and donor support are needed. They are also seeking an intern, preferably someone knowledgeable in social media and web design, to help get the word out about the mission and upcoming events. Follow RAFT on Twitter at @RAFTOcean; like the Ocean County RAFT page on Facebook; and visit: oceancountyraft.wixsite.com/mysite. 