

Women's Interfaith Network finds common ground

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SARASOTA - In the wake of 9/11, Arlene Pearlman said she saw Islamophobia spread like a contagious disease.

Facts

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The Women's Interfaith Network of Sarasota-Bradenton accepts new members year round. Annual dues are \$10. Printable membership form: <http://bit.ly/1JKvylr>

Talking heads on TV sewed long-lasting distrust, wariness and prejudice toward Muslims abroad and at home. Pearlman said she knew there was a mosque in Sarasota, so there must be a local community suffering from the backlash.

"I thought they must be going through a terrible, terrible time," she said. "No children and no adults should be called names, be stereotyped, have the media decide who they are."

So in 2008, Pearlman founded the Women's Interfaith Network of Sarasota-Bradenton, inviting women of all faiths — and those without — to look past their religious differences and instead celebrate their common humanity. The organization's first meeting only saw about 15 women, but connecting even a few was important to Pearlman.

Growing up during World War II as a secular Jew in New Jersey, the 82-year-old knew what it was like to face discrimination. Still bright in her memory is the first day of seventh-grade math class when her teacher asked all German or Jewish students to identify themselves.

"The teacher said 'You'll have to work twice as hard because I don't like Germans and I don't like Jews,' " Pearlman recalled. "It's unfair. We're born the way we're born, and you don't pick on people because of their religion or color or their size or their abilities. It hurts."

Pearlman would go on to befriend a German girl in the class. The two still talk.

At WIN's first meeting, Pearlman said she saw that same willingness to set aside cultural differences. Through word of mouth mostly, WIN has now grown to about 130 members, most aged 50 to 90.

The organization has attracted worshipers of Baha'i, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Wicca and numerous other religions, faiths and beliefs. The organization extended into Venice, Nokomis and Osprey last year.

WIN members meet throughout the year to review books, listen to guest speakers and trade recipes. It is not uncommon for members to attend services at each other's places of worship.

Members have shared both a traditional Seder dinner and eaten annual fast-breaking meals during Ramadan at the Islamic Society of Sarasota Bradenton.

"It's really a wonderful experience. Our mosque is always open to everyone to come to service," said Amani Makarita, 51. "Some will say they were scared to come in before, and they feel welcome now."

Makarita said she is grateful to live in a country that was founded on religious freedom, and she is happy to see more people genuinely curious about her faith.

"We want them to see real Muslims in their daily life," she said. "If we clear some minds and see the reality of how much we have in common ... that's a big step."

By far the most enjoyed and successful WIN activity is a dining experience called common tables, Pearlman said.

Every October, WIN members are assigned into diverse groups of six to eight. For an entire year the groups meet every month for lunch, where the women discuss the similarities and differences in their religions, upbringing and daily lives.

Almost no questions are off limits, Pearlman said, but WIN members are not allowed to rebuke other religions or attempt to convert members to their own.

Pearlman said these shared meals shatter cliques and misperceptions. WIN members often pass along their newfound knowledge to family, friends and co-workers.

"They may come in thinking one thing, but after spending a couple of hours they have new insights into somebody. And after a couple of times together they understand that person so much better," she said. "The more you get to know somebody, the more you find out they're just like you."

Arlene Horowitz, a 71-year-old humanist and Sarasota resident, said she enjoys the “sisterhood” formed at the common tables.

“You get to know women that you normally would not have an occasion to get together with, or to form a really close bond with,” she said. “I still get together with the first common table I belonged to once a month.”

Pearlman said WIN is working against decades of conditioning by American media to make people fear those who aren’t like them.

“Go back and look at the Westerns,” she said. “All the cowboys were good guys, and all the Native Americans were no good.”

But she has hope that today’s youth will be better equipped to draw their own conclusions about the unfamiliar through communication tools such as the Internet.

“There was a time when everyone voted the way their parents voted. I’d like to think that’s changed,” she said. “Younger generations can think for themselves. There’s a ton of information through technology that was never available, and that they care enough to look at the information that’s out there.”