

## Finding Similarities Among Differences

By John Hanc

IN a circle of adolescents and adults, two heads lean toward each other in discussion. One of them, Rachel Weiss, an adult rabbinical student, wears a yarmulke; the other, Halima Bakillah, a high school student, wears a hijab, or head scarf.

They are part of a larger group meeting on a recent Sunday afternoon in a second-floor classroom at the White Rock Baptist Church. Behind them, tacked up on a wall, is a poster praising Jesus. In a nearby circle sits the Rev. Jay Gardner, the African-American youth minister of the church, engaged in similarly earnest but cordial conversation with another group of teenagers—Jews, Christians, Muslims, someone of the Bahai faith.

The group—composed of 19 youngsters and 13 adults—is black, white, rich, poor; products of the city and the distant suburbs. And here, in one room, they are all talking, laughing even, without any apparent rancor or discomfort.

Cynics might dismiss this as another “Kumbaya” moment: a well-intentioned but brief intermission in the saga of hatred and suspicion among religions. But the young have a way of bringing down the curtain on tired, old dramas. These youngsters seem determined to write a new script, at least for the city known for brotherly love.

They are members of Walking the Walk, a program that brings together high school students of different faiths to foster better understanding of one another and to encourage cooperation on community service projects. Organized by the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia, a nonprofit group that promotes interfaith dialogue, the name Walking the Walk refers to the fact that the students are living their values, “not just talking about them,” said Abby Stamelman Hocky, the center’s executive director.

The students meet twice a month; one meeting is devoted to their community service projects, the other to discussing their values and respective reli-



### COMMON GROUND

*From left, Kamil Saeid, Hannah Weilbacher, Dan Siegelman and Halima Bakillah, students from the interfaith group Walking the Walk, with their adult leader, Rachel Weiss (back to camera), in Philadelphia.*

gious communities. They meet at houses of worship throughout greater Philadelphia and earn school credit for their participation.

The program is beginning its fourth year. During the 2007-8 school year, 61 teenagers from Philadelphia-area high schools worked in three Walking the Walk groups, helping to clean up local streams, making blankets for the children of homeless mothers, collecting books for prisoners wishing to pursue their education and visiting a residence for the developmentally disabled.

Along the way, they shared their thoughts, wrote poems and created art, and let go of some stereotypes, too. The students who gathered on this Sunday in October are mentors, returning members of last year’s Walking the Walk program. They are planning the projects they will be working on with their groups for this school year.

First, though, they are discussing how to deal with the 800-pound gorilla that lumbers into the room when-

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ever they meet—the sometimes obvious religious differences. Ms. Weiss, a student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pa., moderates one group of student leaders as they discuss ways to communicate with one another and with the new students who have joined this year's program (Facebook and MySpace are suggested by the students). Ms. Weiss also reviews the script students are expected to follow when bringing up touchy subjects:

"Oops" is what you say when you or another person has said something that may have offended someone. "Ouch" is what you say when you are the one offended. "Wow" is what you say when you are impressed by something you learned from someone of another faith.

Yasmine Hadjar, 17, is telling Ms. Weiss and the others about an "ouch" moment in her group last year. "A girl said to me, 'Aren't all Muslim women supposed to be oppressed?'" she said, as a few of the other students gasped. "I just tried to educate her and told her that no one forces us to do anything. What we do is our choice."

Yasmine laughs as she tells the story, and you can see why. With her stylish hairdo, fashionable jeans and confident demeanor, it's hard to visualize a situation where she would feel intimidated by anybody. Ms. Weiss credits Yasmine for handling the situation correctly and points out that students should not avoid or discourage questions and free exchange, even if a few "oops" and "ouch" moments may result.

After all, she says, "we're not having a dialogue to say, I like ice cream and the Jonas Brothers."

At the mention of the teenybopper band, several loud groans are emitted from the group. Ms. Weiss chuckles and says sarcastically, "I guess we have some big Jonas Brothers fans here."

"Not me!" said Dan Siegelman, 17.

Kamil Saeid, also 17, turns to Dan with a look of pained mock sincerity. "Ouch!" he said.

The group bursts into laughter.

This ability to joke and find common ground (or common ground for disagreement over pop culture icons) is why Mr. Gardner says he finds Walking the Walk so inspiring. "We were making blankets for the homeless last year, as one of the projects," he said. "And they're talking about TV shows they like. I didn't know most of the shows, but it made me think, What can the religious community do to cross barriers they way these kids do?"

Supporting this program, as Mr. Gardner's church does, is good for starters. Many faith communities in Philadelphia encourage their young congregants and religious leaders to participate, and have been doing so since 2005, when Ms. Stamelman Hocky proposed the idea to them. "We thought we'd be twisting arms," she said. "We were surprised by the enthusiasm."

Among those most enthusiastic was Anwar Muhaimin, imam of the Quba Institute, the oldest mosque in Philadelphia, founded in 1949. He encouraged his 16-year-old son, Ibrahim, to participate. "He was the one telling me, 'This is something you can gain from, this can open your mind,'" said Ibrahim, a mentor for the 2008-9 year. "He was right. It's really paid off."

Ibrahim said he had never really known a Jewish person before Walking the Walk. Now, he's good friends with several Jewish teenagers he met through the program, and he has learned much about their faith—and its similarity to some core Muslim beliefs.

"That's what fascinates me," said Zia Islam, another Muslim student in the program. "I learned we're different, but essentially the same."

No effort is made to change those differences, just to recognize them—and, even more important, their similarities. "This is not about proselytizing, it's about engaging," said Ms. Weiss, as she looked at her group chatting animatedly. "Look at what they're doing. They're changing the world."

That concept is exactly what Eugene C. Roehlkepar-tain had hoped for two years ago when he started the umbrella group for Walking the Walk, a nonprofit program called Inspired to Serve, which provides support for Walking the Walk in Philadelphia, as well as three

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similar interfaith programs for teenagers in Chicago, New Orleans and St. Paul. A major portion of Inspired to Serve's financing comes from a three-year, \$1.04 million grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal organization that supports initiatives in community service learning.

"We believed that bringing kids together across their religious differences was a powerful learning opportunity," Mr. Roehlkepartain said. The goals, he said, were to encourage youngsters to give back to their communities through service projects and to help them "become more articulate about their own beliefs, but also to become more respectful of other beliefs."

While the teenagers in the Walking the Walk program are undoubtedly respectful of one another, involved in their faiths and motivated to do good in the community, they are still teenagers, sometimes refreshingly so. Halima, 16, is part of a delegation of Walking the Walk students who attended a conference in Chicago this summer, along with students from the three other interfaith programs. During the meeting at the church, she gave a brief report about some of the training sessions and workshops she had attended at the conference, and then added with a grin, "But we goofed off a lot, too."

That may be what impresses the teenagers most: that they can meet with other teenagers wearing hijabs or yarmulkes, who are Muslim, Jewish or Christian, and talk—or text—about pizza, goofing off, television and the Jonas Brothers. Asked what was the most important lesson he had learned from getting to know young people of other faiths, Ibrahim, son of the imam, said without hesitation, "I learned they're just like me."