

Seeking Wisdom

New book explores stories of friendship and faith.

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In Metro Detroit, a mostly segregated area of isolated and sometimes hostile communities, with almost every person affected by the failing econ-

omy, a devastated auto industry, skyrocketing unemployment, an area where homes have been devalued by as much as 50 percent, I saw a spark of hope.

A spark ignited with my friends from WISDOM (Women's Interfaith Solutions for Dialogue and Outreach in MetroDetroit), women who share my passion for opening hearts and opening minds, women who dare to cross boundaries to make friends. Together, we created *FRIENDSHIP and FAITH; the WISDOM of women creating alliances for peace*, a book that offers hope and the possibility of how we can create peace if we are willing to extend our hands in friendship and formulate meaningful connections.

Twenty-nine of us, ages 20 to 80 from eight different faiths — Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist — collaborated for a year to produce a collection of inspiring stories, stories of creating friendships across religious and cultural divides. Stories that describe everything from surviving flat-out hatred — to the far simpler challenge of making friends with someone of a different religion and race when you share a hospital room; stories that describe making friends at school, overcoming misunderstandings with colleagues at work and even daring to establish friendships that circle the globe; stories that will lift spirits — perhaps even inspire people to spark a new friendship wherever they live.

Our journey to create *FRIENDSHIP and FAITH* began on Jan. 24, 2009, when 14 WISDOM leaders gathered for a retreat at the Muslim Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills, led by the Rev. Sharon Buttry, whose story appears in the book. The retreat was called "Building Bridges"; the leaders explored ways to

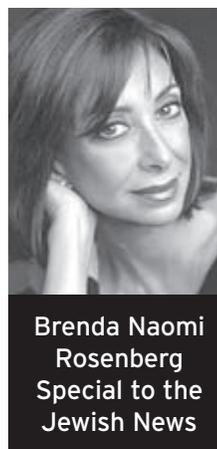
strengthen relationships between women and create innovative projects for the future.

To deepen our reflections that weekend, we divided into pairs — I teamed up with Gigi Salka, a Muslim friend and board member of the Muslim Unity Center. Our first exercise was to draw the bridge that connected us. Our bridge was a beautiful rainbow of colors; filled with many of the interfaith and educational projects we had worked on together, including placing a mini Jewish library, a gift of the Farbman family, at the Muslim Unity Center.

I wanted to share not only our bridge-building efforts, but also all the stories in the room. I proposed a book of our personal stories of how we built bridges across religious and cultural divides, with the hope to inspire others to reach out and to expand the circle of WISDOM.

The group's enthusiastic response led to a task force focused on gathering stories from dozens of women from diverse backgrounds. Our task force included WISDOM board members Padma Kuppa, (Hindu) Sheri Schiff (Jewish), President Gail Katz (Jewish) and me. We turned to another friend: David Crumm, founding editor of *Read The Spirit* (www.ReadTheSpirit.com), an online magazine, and publisher of *ReadTheSpirit Books*. Crumm not only published our book, but also helped us expand our creative circle. We invited writers from a similarly wide range of backgrounds to help us. Some of the writers are still in college — and some are veteran, nationally known writers.

As you open the book, you'll meet my three dear friends; Gail Katz, Trish Harris, (Catholic) and Shahina Begg, (Muslim) who will invite you to sit down with them around a kitchen table. They'll tell you about the



Brenda Naomi Rosenberg
Special to the Jewish News

A Journey Outward And Inward

As an interfaith activist, I'm often asked where my ideas and my energy for this work originated. I have to trace my long journey back to my years growing up in a post-war secular Jewish family. I spent my early childhood and my elementary school years in Silver Spring, Md., in a mostly non-Jewish neighborhood. I was one of a few Jewish children in my school.

I started each morning bowing my head with all the other children and say-

ing the Lord's Prayer in my public school classroom, and even in my sleep today I can recite, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name ..." I knew, deep inside me, that this was really not my prayer.

At Christmastime, we had Christmas plays and sang *Silent Night, Oh Come All Ye Faithful* and *Joy to the World*. Although I sang along, I knew that these were not my songs. Every year I had to bring in my family menorah and explain the meaning of Chanukah, and I hated being singled out as different.



Gail Katz
Special to the Jewish News

My Judaism mostly revolved around holidays. We would go to the synagogue on the High Holy Days and my memories were again about feeling different and uncomfortable. Girls were not expected back then to get any real Jewish education and so I felt conspicuous for not knowing how to read or recite the Hebrew prayers. I would sit next to my father, playing with the *tsitsit* on his *tallit*, waiting impatiently to leave. There was always this sense of anger inside me that I didn't fit in anywhere!

When I was 12 years old, we moved to Oak Park. My junior high school

years were difficult ones because I still felt different, even though I was now in classes with many Jewish students. I was a target for bullying as the new, shy, all-A student. My sense of outrage at not being given respect for being different from the "cool" kids laid the foundation for my later passion in helping students to organize diversity clubs.

During the early 1960s, my mother's father came from New York to live with us. I learned from my grandfather about his world of Eastern European Jewry, his love for the Torah, his need to keep kosher, his *davening* and laying *tefillin* every morning. Our Passover seders became very traditional, and to this day, we sing out my grandfather's Eastern European prayers from the Haggadah.