

Stories of Friendship & Faith: The Wisdom of Women Creating Alliances for Peace

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opening hearts, opening minds, opening doors

By Brenda Naomi Rosenberg

In Metro Detroit, a mostly segregated area of isolated and sometimes hostile communities, with almost every person affected by the failing economy, a devastated auto industry, sky-rocketing unemployment, an area where homes have been devalued by as much as 50%, 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 seven different faiths -Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Sikh, 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 & Faith began on January 24, 2009, when 14 WISDOM leaders gathered for a retreat at the Muslim Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, led by the Rev. Sharon Buttry, whose story appears in the book. The retreat was called "Building Bridges". Together we 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 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 dozen of women from diverse backgrounds. Our task force includes WISDOM members Padma Kuppa, Sheri Schiff, Gail Katz, Trish Harris, Ellen Ehrlich, Judy Satterwaite, Paula Drewek and me. We turned to another friend: David Crumm, (founding editor of Read The Spirit www.ReadTheSprit.com, an online magazine, and publisher of ReadTheSpirit Books. David not only published our book, but 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, (Jewish) 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 creation of WISDOM – their meeting at an interfaith event, the documentary premier of "Reuniting the Children of Abraham" at Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church, and how WISDOM has developed into a dynamic women's interfaith dialogue organization hosting many successful educational and social-service programs.

Many stories will feel like you're witnessing events unfolding in your back yard – stories about overcoming tough problems with relationships at school—or finding solutions when families suddenly encounter friction over interreligious marriages. Other stories take you to times and places around the world that you'll find so compelling—so memorable—that you'll want to tell a friend – two girls in Iran risking the wrath of religious authorities with their interfaith friendship, a Jewish woman, child of holocaust survivors, who finds an unexpected friendship when a German couple moves in next door – a Muslim-Hindu marriage that raises cross-country anxiety in India—and a rare true story about an innocent Japanese girl who bravely faced hatred in an internment camp here and also in Japan during World War II. You will read the heartfelt stories of personal struggles. One Muslim woman shares her story of how challenging it was for her to start wearing a head scarf after 9/11, and another about how she ended an abusive marriage, stopped wearing her head scarf and started helping other Arab woman in all their relationships. And, some stories like mine show how a lunch with an Imam led to creating an interfaith project “Reuniting the Children of Abraham” that has crossed race, faith, cultural barriers and international boundaries.

Read our book with a friend or neighbor. Meet us online at our www.FriendshipAndFaith.com web site. Look for our stories on www.ReadTheSpirit.com, and our book on www.Amazon.com. We would love to come to your congregation or organization and present our program 5 Women 5 Journeys, an insightful exchange about our faiths, beliefs and challenges as women. If you are interested in organizing a congregational – wide “read” of this book contact: Gail Katz@Comcast.net