

Youths come together to nurture Earth, share beliefs

By Christine Morente
San Mateo County Times

Posted: 05/13/2009 07:19:18 PM PDT

Updated: 05/14/2009 06:58:39 AM PDT

PALO ALTO — On a stretch of land where the San Francisquito Creek meets the Bay, youths worked together to restore the earth and break down barriers of faith.

About 50 teens and young adults of various religious faiths gathered to help restore a portion of the Baylands Nature Preserve, but they also came together Saturday to understand each other minus the labels and misconceptions.

"We're surrounded by so many people of different backgrounds, and we stay within our niches and don't interact," said Loan Phan of the Muslim American Society's Youth Give in Santa Clara. "We are so young. We need to interact with each other so that when we go out into the world, we'll know how to conduct ourselves."

"If you conduct yourself well, it breaks stereotypes people have on our own faith and ethnicities," the 22-year-old added.

Service

After a few months of learning about each other through Facebook, they finally met for the first time during a Day of Interfaith Service Project.

It was a large-scale effort to help Save the Bay — a community-based organization — remove invasive

plants that have grown thick around the native California sagebrush and marsh coyote bushes.

Joined by other youth-based organizations, Buddhists, Christians, Jews and Muslims bonded.

"We're here to talk about our faith backgrounds," said Theodore Timpson of Go Beyond, a project with the Young Spirit Foundation in Palo Alto. "We're not here to defend our faiths. Every religion in some sense is a minority and often misunderstood. When we come together to listen to each other, we expand."

On a half-mile section of a trail that separated the creek from the Palo Alto Municipal Golf Course, everyone slipped on work gloves and got to work filling large bags with tall invasive grasses.

When they left the site, all silently reflected and meditated on quotes taken from various faith traditions.

Kevin Spencer, 22, a member of Fellowship for Religious Encounter at Stanford University, said public service and religion go hand in hand.

"It creates an atmosphere where people with different faiths are working and living together for a common goal," he said. "They can do all this in the name of public service and let their guards down."

While Ben Graves of the Congregational Church of San Mateo has noticed the differences between faiths, the 14-year-old knows, "it's all the same message."

Loan added to the thought.

"All faiths have a lot in common," she said. "The underlying message is to be good to others and be good to the earth. You'll be closer to God, or any

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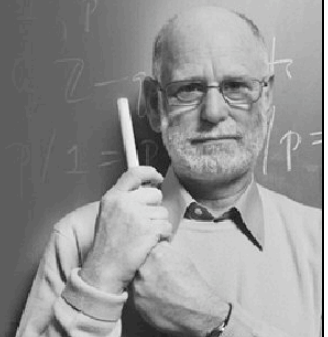


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god you believe in."

Interfaith youths

According to the Rev. Paul Chaffee, executive director of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio, there are more than 200 religions in the Bay Area, coming from every part of the globe.

"It's important how people address the other," Chaffee said. "What happens in the process of dialogue is that it humanizes folks. All of a sudden, you find yourself with a human being that you like."

In 2006, the Interfaith Center began sponsoring the Friends in Faith project after a group of individuals came together recognizing the need for youth dialogue.

Friends in Faith follows the philosophy of appreciative inquiry. Youths listen to each other's stories, explore commonalities and share visions through digital storytelling. Relationships are built on the basic goodness or strength in a person rather than weakness.

"With our traditions, there are common values," said Chaffee, who is affiliated with the United Church of Christ. "These (kids) are learning to be peacemakers and learning not to be afraid of a stranger. They are willing to approach with an open hand rather than a clenched fist. Living in fear is the worst place of all to live."

The Rev. Steven Naylor of the Congregational Church of San Mateo-United Church of Christ said more people have recognized the need to explore other faith traditions since Sept. 11, 2001.

"Diversity and interfaith dialogue is a necessity, especially in today's world," the 29-year-old Burlingame resident said.

Naylor, a progressive Christian, interned at the Interfaith Center when he helped developed Friends in Faith.

"Christianity is not the only way to God," he said. "We can only learn from other faith traditions. (They can) highlight things in our own faith, or things that aren't in our own faith traditions."

Their narratives

Marla Kolman Antebi, a Jewish educator, wanted digital storytelling to be the group's foundation. The 39-year-old started Partners in Peace in 2003 after the second Palestinian uprising in Israel.

Through technology, Antebi helped forge friendships between young Americans and Israelis despite the political environment they were living in; the youths found new ways to express themselves.

"Technology is a very powerful medium," she said from her Oakland home. "Because we have instant access to the world through the Web, there's a natural curiosity. Teens plus technology equals global connection."

This year, youths — many from San Mateo County — have been communicating through Facebook and sharing digital stories exploring sacred space, identity, tradition, values and beliefs.

Sarah Talcott, director of youth programs at the United Religions Initiative in San Francisco, said it's an effective and efficient way to reach youths.

"That's kind of symbolic of our culture and where we are right now," the 30-year-old Walnut Creek resident said. "It's a very digital age, and we want to get our information quickly in a sound bite way. Young people have very busy lives and they learn quickly."

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Antebi said Friends in Faith has developed trust among the teens, and she envisions them as leaders.

"I just want an army of peacemakers," she said.

Chaffee said he thinks that is possible.

"Young people understand more than their parents," he said. "They realize we are a plural community and we better make friends or we're going to be enemies. It's an antidote for the survival of the human race."

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