

Experiences Inspired Interfaith Interconnect

By Carol Graham | Posted: Thursday, May 12, 2016 12:00 am

Ruth Gasten remembers how it felt to be called, "Nazi."

At 5 years old, she didn't know what it meant, only that it was bad. The children who taunted her didn't comprehend the terrible irony that Ruth and her parents had had to flee their home in Germany to escape the Nazis in 1939.

Years later, when 9/11 occurred, Gasten was teaching parenting classes at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

"One of my Muslim students, Abdul Awwal, and I had become friends. Through him, I met kind, hard-working Muslim families who lived in our valley," says Gasten. "I was pained to see them being harassed and insulted because community members, most of whom didn't know any Muslims, were afraid."

That shared experience, some six decades apart, inspired the start of Interfaith Interconnect, a Tri-Valley group of community members and clergy whose mission is "To enrich, inform and educate ourselves and others about the great diversity of faiths and cultures in our valley."

"When people of different faiths come in contact with each other, their fears are dissipated. They become comfortable with each other," says Gasten. "We are all much more alike than we are different."

Interfaith Interconnect's inaugural event, held in December 2011, featured a program about the holidays of Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist religions. Gasten and Awwal were happily surprised at the community interest and high attendance.

Other interfaith events soon followed: two "Three Weddings and a Reception" events, the first in 2012, depicting Protestant, Jewish and Muslim weddings, and the second in 2015, depicting Hindu, Catholic and Buddhist weddings; annual picnics hosted each September to coincide with the United



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Ruth Gasten converses with Alicia Shaik during Pleasanton 1st Wednesday Street Party.

Nations' International Day of Peace; and concerts featuring the songs, music, chants and dances of diverse religious groups.

"At our first interfaith concert, 'Sharing Our Music,' held at Asbury United Methodist Church, Congregation Beth Emek performers sang and played 'Havah Nagilah' (let us rejoice). Women in the audience arose from their seats and danced the hora. A group of young Indian girls in beautiful, classical Indian dance costumes from the Kalaikoil Dance and Arts Academy joined them," says Gasten. "The group of young girls and the women of all ages and cultures danced around the church. It was truly a joyful interfaith moment."

On Sunday, May 22, all are invited to attend "Shared Values among Faiths," during which a panel of speakers will discuss their respective faiths, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. The event is free, and takes place from 2-4 p.m. at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, 678 Enos Way, Livermore. The program will include a Q & A period followed by a reception.

"All people have to do is show up at one of our events, which are listed on our Facebook page," says Gasten. "If they want to put their names on our mailing list, they will be notified of future activities. There is no charge for any of our activities."

Gasten's past has given her a compassionate understanding of the challenges immigrants and refugees encounter in a new country.

"My parents and I came to the U.S. with only \$75 in German marks, and had to start our lives over again," says Gasten of their arrival in Chicago. "I didn't know the language or the way big-city kids acted. My parents found menial jobs and I went to a daycare center after school. Because I spoke German, the other children would call me a Nazi. Fortunately, an older boy became my protector and that problem went away."

That episode is chronicled under "My Hero" in Gasten's 2002 book, "An Accidental American: Memories of an Immigrant Childhood." It is available on Amazon in paperback and Kindle editions.

"My parents and I came from Nieder-Ohmen, a tiny village in northeastern Germany where my father had been a cattle dealer. In Chicago, the only cattle were the carcasses in the meat-packing plants," says Gasten. "At first, we were completely at a loss in the culture of a large American city. For example, my parents had read about Al Capone in the German newspapers, and for our first weeks here, my mother would pull me into a doorway whenever she saw a large black sedan. She was sure that one of Al Capone's henchmen would shoot us on the street."

Gasten, a Livermore resident since 1963, worked as a parent educator for 50 years, and remains actively involved in community groups.

"The values of Judaism are a part of my life: to help those less fortunate; to value education, family and community; and to live a balanced life," says Gasten. "Several quotations from the Talmud and

from Jewish sages have impacted me strongly, including, 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?'

"Interfaith Interconnect functions through a leadership committee, composed of a representative and alternate from each of the 16 participating congregations," she adds. "We meet monthly, and when we have a special project, a committee is formed to work on it. There is no paid staff; we are all volunteers."

Religion Chats, open to all, are hosted on the 2nd Wednesday of each month at 5 p.m. Each talk presents a different topic introduced by two invited speakers, then explored further within small groups. Past topics have included, "What does your faith or culture teach about the afterlife?" and "How does your faith or culture deal with the death of a loved one?" Recently, speakers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and an American Indian tribe addressed, "What does your faith or culture teach about creation?"

Religion Chats alternate between worship-community locations in Livermore and Pleasanton. For information on upcoming locations and topics, or to sign up for mailings, email interfaith.interconnect@gmail.com.

"At Interfaith Interconnect events, no political issues are discussed," says Gasten. "We want attendees to be comfortable with others of different faiths and not get sidetracked by international issues over which we have no control."

Interfaith Interconnect partners with Pleasanton's SEED (Seeking Education Equity and Diversity), a program that educates teachers and administrators about religious and cultural diversity in their schools. In addition, Gasten started the Eyewitnesses to History Speakers Bureau, in which speakers visit schools to share their personal stories of historical events.

"Being born during Hitler's rule in Germany, remembering the propaganda-driven hatred of the Jews, and seeing most of my father's family wiped out in the Holocaust, has driven me to get involved when I see a group singled out for persecution," says Gasten. "When I speak at schools about being a survivor of the Holocaust, I end by saying, 'Democracy is not a spectator sport.' We must be part of keeping the values of our country alive, and that includes helping refugees who come to the U.S. to find hope and better lives for their families."

To learn more, visit www.interfaithinterconnect.weebly.com, or Interfaith Interconnect on Facebook.

A short reception will follow the program for conversation and refreshments. There is no charge, but donations will be accepted. Registration through Eventbrite is requested to ensure adequate amounts of refreshments and handouts. Sign up at <http://sharedvalues.eventbrite.com>.