

Youths Voice Passion for Social Justice at 'This Is Us'

By Carol Graham | Posted: Thursday, October 5, 2017 12:00 am

Looking at the four panelists, it was hard to imagine what common cause had brought them together. Two were girls, two boys. Their ages ranged from mid-teens to mid-20s. One wore a hijab, one a ponytail.

Yet, as they began speaking, the common thread became clear as they voiced their passion for social justice.

Moderator Alisha Shaik, 16, turned to the panel and said, "Describe one instance where you felt marginalized and how it affected you."

Sarim Mundres took the microphone.

"In Salt Lake City, my friends and I walked into a Subway restaurant to grab lunch," he began. "I was 14 at the time. The worker was around 18. He casually asked, 'Where are you from?' I said I'm from California. He looked at me and said, 'No, where are you really really from?' I told him my parents are from Pakistan. He continued making the sandwich and asked, 'Would you define yourself as a Muslim?' I said I consider myself that. Then he delivered the final blow and said, 'Do you know how to make a bomb?'"

"At the time I laughed it off. I said 'no,' but later on, once I reflected on that story, I realized I'm thankful to be living in an area that is open-minded. I learned from that one scenario that that is not always the case."

All of the panelists have faced their (un)fair share of questions, and worse – suspicions. Because of the way they look, the color of their skin or the way they choose to dress, they've endured degrading comments from others.

On October 1, Interfaith for Youth hosted "This Is Us," a youth panel discussion that along with Shaik and Mundres included Amy Leona Masker and Kyle Forgues. The talk was open to the public. It took place at the Muslim Community Center of the East Bay in Pleasanton.

"This Is Us came about because of the national election and the presidency, and mostly because youths have experienced a radical shift in their everyday lives," Shaik said. "Minority youths were both empowered and threatened. We realized we have to stand up for ourselves. To bring this dynamic to light, Interfaith For Youth decided to host This Is Us."

Masker had, in high school, participated in a Day of Silence, a national, student-led event designed to bring awareness to the silencing effects of anti-LGBTQ name-calling, bullying and harassment.

"Later, I opened up to my best friend about why I had participated. She told me that I was going to hell," said the Las Positas College student. "That was the last time we spoke."

"I faced a lot of bullying and harassment growing up. During the 2008 election season, my high school campus became even more unsafe for me and other students because of racism, homophobia and religious intolerance. Racism directed at Barack Obama and his supporters was a different experience. Being white, it was my first time experiencing racism so up close. I heard slurs, references to lynching and monkey impressions. I was shocked to hear it come out of peers' mouths."

Though the prejudices the youths face are based on different traits, the responses triggered are remarkably similar: a desire to speak up, to shine a light on irrational judgments, and to advocate acquiring knowledge of others.

"I wear a scarf, so I often get the question 'Isn't the scarf a symbol of oppression?'" said Shaik. "No, it shows my connection to God, and has to do with modesty. When I think of modesty, I think of the Mother Mary. In Islam, we give her one of the highest statuses because in our eyes she is the mother of believers. We look at her with great respect. Though I am not like her, I aspire to be. She is the inspiration."

Last year, Shaik founded Interfaith for Youth, a nonprofit with the mission of breaking down barriers that separate and prevent Tri-Valley youths from peacefully coexisting. Its Facebook page, Interfaith for Youth Campaign, states "Our purpose is to spread accurate information about different religions in times where rumors are prevalent. Our main goal is to build a safe and open environment for people of any faith to express their own opinions and worries."

In August, Shaik participated in the 2017 American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Summer Advocacy Institute in Washington, D.C.

"It was an empowering experience," said the Amador Valley High School senior. "The respect that everyone had for each other is what truly stood out. Fighting for justice has no age. After the trip, my passion to fight for youth has grown even more."

The audience of around two dozen members were able to ask the panelists questions.

"How can older generations be more responsive to youths' concerns and needs?" asked one.

"Be open to opposing views and try to see different perspectives," said Forgues, an African-American student at Amador Valley High School. "In Charlottesville, where people carried torches and yelled 'Jews will not replace us,' the President said it was a problem on both sides. But when Colin Kaepernick kneeled on an NFL field during the national anthem, the President said 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now.'"

Interfaith For Youth welcomes youths of all beliefs, including agnosticism and atheism. Meetings take place on the first Wednesday of each month at various public Tri-Valley locations, which are announced on Facebook along with special events.

"I hope This Is Us attendees got a better sense of where youths are with everything going on in the nation," Shaik said. "More than that, I hope they recognize that youths are not just tomorrow's leaders, but today's leaders as well. Youths have complex understandings of the world, and diverse backgrounds and experiences that, I believe, can change this country for the better."

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