

Fast-breaking dinner will spark dialogue at the end of Ramadan

By Brock Weir

If you want to create a dialogue, the simplest way is to bring everyone around the same table ? and if there's food involved, so much the better, says Azim Shamshiev of the Intercultural Dialogue Institute.

In a first for Aurora, this year the Toronto-based Intercultural Dialogue Institute is joining forces with York Children's Aid Society, to host an Iftar dinner or fast-breaking dinner, to mark the month of Ramadan.

The purpose of the event, according to Mr. Shamshiev, is to bring together people of various faiths, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, to share a meal and provide a cross-cultural exchange.

?We want to accomplish intercultural learning, interfaith learning, so we learn from each other,? he says. ?In terms of dialogue, I think the simplest way of dialogue is simply bringing different people around the same table. Food is crucial because when you share food with somebody, it can be your neighbour, colleague, friend, relative, or somebody from different cultural or ethnic groups. Having a meal together provides us a warm atmosphere for building a relationship where we can facilitate dialogue.?

This series of dinners across the GTA began over a decade ago as a simple community dinner. The event subsequently grew to incorporate guest speakers and displays of multiple cultures. It was a small-scale beginning, finding its roots in a Meet Your Neighbour program spearheaded by the Institute as a series of private dinners at family houses.

?We tried to match families of different backgrounds so they came together for dinner,? he says. ?We had our biggest interest in this around Ramadan time. This is one of the occasions when we try to bring people together because we believe the solutions to many of the problems we may have in the future lies in the idea that people should come together, try to talk to each other, and try to engage in dialogue in a respectful way, while trying to be respectful and accepting of others.

?Ramadan is the holiest month for Muslims around the world. It is a time when you try to abstain from food and drink for a certain amount of hours during the day for 30 days. It is not just about hunger and thirst, but the key idea is about purifying your soul. It is a time of spiritual purification or, if you wish, a chance to reconsider or renew your commitment and values.?

While Ramadan provides a very strong spiritual path, at the same time it also has a very strong community aspect, says Mr. Shamshiev. People are hungry and it provides some food for thought towards inner reflections. People often invite each other into their homes for fast-breaking meals such as these, or even ?midnight meals? providing a communal eating experience before the day's fast begins.

?There are social bonds within the community and this is one of the aspects we will be hosting in Aurora, to strengthen the bond between people of different faiths and cultures,? he says.

Working in collaboration with the York Children's Aid Society, Aurora's Iftar dinner will share a theme of ?mental health and social inclusion?, with guest speakers from the Toronto branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association. Bringing in the cultural element, it will include traditional Turkish food, including renowned Turkish coffee prepared right on the spot, as well a performance of flamenco guitar.

?We try to give some information about Ramadan so people can learn, and then provide a setting for dialogue,? he says. ?We also pick a topic of common interest to many people, such as mental health issues.?

The Aurora Iftar Dinner will take place at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Wednesday, July 23. For more information, visit www.ramadandinner.ca.