

Breaking bread brought an oasis of calm between local faiths



By Brock Weir

With tensions boiling over between Israel and Hamas in recent weeks, Aurora was an oasis of calm last week as people from across York Region, representing many faiths that add to the richness of local culture, came together for an evening of dialogue.

Muslims and Jews alike were welcomed to the Aurora Cultural Centre last Wednesday, where the Centre partnered with the York Region Children's Aid Society and the Intercultural Dialogue Institute of Greater Toronto, for a fast-breaking meal to mark Ramadan, one of the most important observances in the Muslim faith.

Stressing the importance of communications between faiths, the dialogue was only interrupted after sundown when individuals dressed in the clothes of their faith intermingled with the business casual of the western world, and even a uniform or two, lined up to break bread.

This is the second Iftar dinner hosted in York Region by the Interfaith Dialogue Institute, and the first for Aurora. Partnering with York CAS, they stressed that the cornerstone to peace and harmony in this world is 'first to be understood.'

'The key to being understood is first to understand,' said Patrick Lake, Executive Director of York CAS. 'In the times we are in today, when we see around the world so much controversy and so much misunderstanding, so much violence, and so much breaking down of relationships between people, to be able to focus our energies and be part of taking a step together to break down those barriers and better understand is something we are very proud of' particularly in a community like York which is changing at an absolute breakneck speed.

'We now as a community have about half of our population who were born somewhere other than Canada. It is that change that is really changing the fabric of our community. The CAS has responsibility for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children in York Region and one of the important lessons we have learned, as an organization, is the importance family, culture and community play in making things better for kids in providing that safety, continuity and support to families that allow them to deal with changes that they face.'

It is also important, he added, for the organization to 'build connections' and share in celebrations throughout the community. Their greatest strength is addressing both the needs of the individual, as well as the needs of the community, to move ahead.

For Azim Shamshiev, Vice President of Intercultural Dialogue for the Institute, Ramadan is unique to Islam, but the principle of fasting is not. It can be in different forms, but one thing that is shared across the board is that in the grand scheme of things, it is not really about abstaining from food and drink, but of something greater.

‘It is about spiritual purification and renewing our commitments to our values, moral purification,’ he said. ‘There is also a strong social and community aspect to fasting and that is to bring people of different faiths and cultures together. For Muslims around the world, this is a special occasion to invite their friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbours, around the same table to break bread together. This is very crucial in why we are organizing these dinners.’

Speaking near the start of the evening, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe said he was reminded of a story he had recently heard on the radio where the subject of the Ramadan fast came up in conversation between two carpooling coworkers, one Muslim and the other Christian. As the Muslim explained this core tenant of faith, the Christian decided to join him for the month of fasting. In turn, the Muslim eventually joined the Christian in taking part in Lent, fostering a cross-cultural exchange. It reminded him of a business meeting he had in Quebec near the height of the tensions experienced in the last Referendum, he said.

‘Our conversation was very basic, but what it ultimately came down to was he was interested in exactly what I was interested in: You have to make the mortgage payment, you want to have a good life, you want to provide for your wife and make sure your children are taken care of,’ said Mayor Dawe. ‘It really said to me that we are really all the same and that you have to seek to understand and then to be understood.’

‘The onus is on us to understand.’

Reminding people of the true ties that bind is also an important principle in art, added Bonnie Kraft, president of the Aurora Cultural Centre's Board of Directors. As an artist, she said she has found art, in all its forms, as the ‘universal language’ with ‘no borders or barriers’, celebrating ‘uniqueness, individual life experiences, and different perspectives.’

‘The essence of artistic expression, whether it be visual, arts, or music has the capacity to speak to each one of us and touch in us our commonality,’ she said. ‘We at the Cultural Centre are committed to bringing people together, to share in diverse cultural experiences through our programs, events and community engagement. As we express ourselves through art, and in our response to art, we are reminded that we are much more similar than we are different.’