

The Faith Project to spark discussion on religion and spirituality in 'pluralistic' society



By Brock Weir

It's not every day that film makers are given money and almost carte blanche to do what they want, but that is exactly what happened when Shiraz Janjua and his team of filmmakers were tasked by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation to explore the wide-ranging world of tolerance.

The result was The Faith Project, a series of short films focusing on seven young Canadians sharing the rituals that define their spiritual lives, inviting viewers to 'contemplate their inner personal landscapes of faith in a pluralistic society.'

While these short films have often been viewed on their own, they have been put together into one longer feature which is hoped to spark some stimulating spiritual discussion at the Aurora Public Library next week.

Mr. Janjua will showcase the film at the Library (APL) next Thursday, January 18.

'I am happy we're actually going to have an audience to engage with the films and I am looking forward to actually hearing people's reactions and having a conversation with them about what the films actually provoked in them emotionally, how their own stories might be reflected in those films,' he says. 'What we wanted to do with them is start a conversation about faith in a way that was more personal and relatable, focusing on larger issues [in a way that] was human-centred.'

The Faith Project was sparked by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation which was spearheading an anti-racism initiative focusing on interfaith issues and tolerance. Working with the National Film Board of Canada, they zeroed in on a film exploring those issues with what Mr. Janua describes as a rather 'open mandate.'

He and the film's producers went from there, settling on a starting point of, 'What are the issues people of faith are really experiencing in our culture?' along with 'What is the dialogue

around faith in the media and the news?'

'There are always issues like reasonable accommodation and different controversies that flare up now and again and I wanted to see how that actually affects people's lives,'

he says.

These are exactly the kinds of conversations the APL is hoping The Faith Project will inspire when the film unspools in the Magna Room.

Mr. Janjua is a member of the APL's Writers Group and it was through the group he connected with Reccia Mandelcorn, the APL's Manager of Community Collaboration.

'The film is just so beautifully shot and I loved the personal focus and one-on-one,' says Ms. Mandelcorn. 'We couldn't really do a panel because we have so many faith leaders in our community that to invite some would

be to not invite others. We sent out the call to everybody and we invited everyone to come in so we could have a community discussion around faith and the place of faith and churches, synagogues and mosques in our community as social activists.

'We think about newcomers when we think about people who are disenfranchised and need breakfasts or dinners, we think about where there may be bins for clothing, where we think people might be advocating for LGBTQ rights, a lot of that comes right back

to faith communities. I thought we could get a discussion going and interconnect. We sent out the call to the York Regional Police's Cultural and Diversity Unit, all the different churches and church groups, and we asked them all to be a part of the conversation. I think it is going to be fabulous! I am so excited about it.?

This excitement is shared by Mr. Janjua.

Finished two years ago, he says The Faith Project might not have changed anything when it comes to tolerance and inclusivity, but having an ongoing 'cultural conversation' can ultimately bring about that difference.

'These are the experiences that anchor their identity. Instead of being an abstract concept, they can make it more personal and human. That is where we want the conversation to go,' he says. 'A lot of times when we hear issues in the news, whether it is the really big issues like terrorism, integration, things like that, people will often look and ask, 'what is this community doing about this issue? How are they going to integrate into Canadian society? It is all very abstract. It is not at the level of, 'My neighbour, my friend, my coworker, my sister, my brother.' We don't see enough of what is that kernel of beauty that people keep returning to in their lives.

'That is the kernel that animates who they are in the world. We want to explore that and we're hoping with these films they will reach an audience that will be able to take that message forward and, as they encounter so many of these issues in the world, they are not going to talk about abstract terms; they will think more along the lines that these are human beings just like me, they are struggling with the same conflicts I am struggling with, and there is some sort of relationship there that we can build on because we're all looking for similar answers to the big questions in life.'