

SERVING UP PEACE

Muslim, Jewish volunteers work as a team to feed hungry, homeless

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Somerset - Scott Thompson, at left, places assembled meals into boxes at the end of the meal assembly line in a hallway at the Muslim Foundation, Inc. The Rutgers Shalom/Salaam student organization and other multi-ethnic volunteers join at the Muslim Foundation, Inc. mosque in Somerset to prepare over 500 meals for the homeless on Sunday, November 20, 2011. (AUGUSTO F. MENEZES/Staff photographer) METRO. B69623630Z.1 / A.F. MENEZES/MyCentralJersey/STAFF

Written by Cheryl Makin | Staff Writer

Franklin — While peace in the Middle East seems elusive to many, Muslim and Jewish volunteers in Middlesex and Somerset counties joyfully worked together on Sunday to feed the homeless.

In the spirit of Thanksgiving, more than 100 members of the Muslims Against Hunger Project, Rutgers Shalom-Salaam and the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding gathered at the Muslim Foundation Inc. mosque in Somerset to cook meals from both religions' cookbooks.

Delicious smells wafting up from the basement kitchen area of the mosque mingled with friendly conversations and laughter. Volunteers of both faiths created more than 400 meals for the homeless at a veterans shelter and in New York City.

In three hours, volunteers cooked meals consisting of tandoori chicken, rice pilaf, chickpea salad, mixed vegetables (corn and string beans), regular salad, buttered bread, kheer (rice pudding) and cholent (a meat and vegetable stew).

After the cooking session, the volunteers — many wearing Jewish kipot skullcaps and Muslim hijab headscarves — broke bread together as they sampled their meals for an interfaith luncheon of their own.

And after members of both religions recited their afternoon prayers, a group of the volunteers headed to deliver the meals to the homeless.

One group delivered the lunches to the homeless at the Basking Ridge VA homeless shelter, while a second group went to New York City.

There, the volunteers were joined by a group of Brooklyn-based Orthodox Jews from Masbia, a nonprofit soup kitchen network and food pantry that operates in Brooklyn and Queens.

The volunteers then delivered between 150 and 200 boxed meals to the homeless in local hangouts.

The idea for the mission was the brainchild of Zamir Hassan, founder and director of the 10-year-old Muslims Against Hunger Project, and Walter Ruby, the Muslim Jewish Relations Program Officer of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, a New York-based nonprofit organization.

Rutgers Shalom-Salaam was created in 2010 by Will Eastman, a college senior from Edison, and Bahaa Hashem, an Egyptian native. With the addition of students Jane Vorkuhova and Amjad Saeed, the group was born.

Feeding the hungry is a basic principle of both religions, Ruby noted.

“Jews look to fulfill the commandment of Tikkun Olam (a Hebrew phrase that means ‘repairing the world’), while Muslims seek to follow the principle of Islah (an Arabic word meaning ‘to repair’). Both ideally mean to ‘repair the world.’ Both have tenets in their religions to feed the hungry, to help those in need. No better way than to do it together,” Ruby explained.

The event also was part of the annual Weekend of Twinning, Ruby said.

“The idea of twinning came about three or four years ago, that we should bring the synagogue and mosque into one place. We did. We get together and sit down and talk about how good we are,” Hassan said.

Explaining the concept of twinning, Ruby said almost 125 Muslim-Jewish interfaith events now happen in mosques and synagogues in 26 countries around the world.

Some Christian churches join in the activities, too, he added.

“This is one of the most exciting that we have had. This is the first time they are coming together to feed the hungry,” Ruby said.

Dr. Zofar Jamil, a surgeon by profession and board of trustees member of the Muslims Against Hunger Project, said that he just is a “foot soldier in this battle against hunger.”

“There are a lot of good people in the world. We just need to recruit them,” Jamil said.

Hassan said the event is not just about feeding the hungry, though that is a primary focus.

“It’s about mobilizing the community to get involved. Especially this new immigrant Muslim community, they don’t think there are poor people here. They think that there are poor people only in the old country that they came from,” he explained.

“They think there is no poverty and hunger in America, but it’s the same here, they need to get involved,” Dr. Iqbal Jafri, president of the Cedar Grove Street mosque, said. “Zamir Hassan came to me and told me about the project. It was something we already wanted to do here. It was perfect. The mosque is a big proponent of interfaith dialogue.”

“This is our first anniversary of the mosque and this is the best way to offer to the community at large our cooperation and see that we are part of the community as a whole,” Jafri said.

It has been a wonderful experience, agreed Eastman, Rutgers Shalom-Salaam’s co-founder. “Hey, we got college students up for an 8 a.m. start on a Sunday. As amazing as that is, look what else they can do.”

“Walter Ruby and Zamir Hassan came to a student meeting late at night on campus and laid out their vision and now we are all implementing it. I am doing my best not to get overwhelmed by this whole thing. I am just very humbled,” Eastman said.

Eastman explained how his group, Rutgers Shalom-Salaam, began.

“Bahaa Hashem and I had a few classes together, namely Hebrew and Arab/Israeli conflict, and we started talking. In spite of our differences, we have more commonalities,” explained Eastman, who is Jewish. “It was being inspired by our commonalities that led us to create Shalom-Salaam.”

The words — Shalom in Hebrew and Salaam in Arabic — both mean peace.

“Politics are not discussed,” explained Eastman. “We have so much in common. What we can do with that is the focus. By working together, members of Shalom-Salaam have built deep friendships and strengthened Muslim-Jewish relations on campus.”

On Facebook, Shalom-Salaam has a “membership” of 240 friends, though Eastman noted that many times more than that number show up at an event.

As with all Rutgers clubs, there are no fees or official memberships, and any Rutgers student is welcome.

“We have done events at soup kitchens, but this is on such a bigger scale,” said Tamara Rahoumi of Robbinsville, a junior. “Let people see what we are doing. And the fact that it is at a mosque, a place of worship, I think it is more symbolic that we are coming together in a place of worship. This one seems different.”

Ahmed Ayoub of Jersey City, a freshman, summed up the experience as one that can break down preconceived notions.

“This can break stereotypes that society created. An English teacher once told me that it is our differences that make us different. It is society that encourages our differences. We encourage our similarities. We are not being political, we are coexisting in society. We can do this. We don’t bring international politics into it,” Ayoub said.