

## Women working for peace in world



COURTESY PHOTOS / CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE Among those planning the Women's Interfaith Food Drive are, from left, Armani Wahb, with food drive co-chairwomen Arlene Pearlman of the Congregation of Humanistic Judaism and Lottie Crawford of First United Methodist Church.

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As founder and president of the Center for Religious Tolerance, Andrea Blanch works for peace, understanding, respect and acceptance of all cultures, races and religions. One of the center's newest projects was the formation of the Sarasota-Bradenton Women's Interfaith Network to build bridges between faiths and promote peace and social justice.

### DONATE TO FOOD DRIVE

The Sarasota-Bradenton Women's Interfaith Network will celebrate International Peace Day with an interfaith food drive in conjunction with the U.N. International Day of Peace.

The event will be from 10 a.m. to noon Sept. 21 at All Faiths Food Bank, 717 Cattlemen Road, Sarasota. A food blessing and celebration will take place at noon.

Participating groups include Beneva Christian Church, Brandon Unity Church, Congregation of Humanistic Judaism, Congregation of St. Andrew UCC, Faith Lutheran Church, First United Methodist Church, Islamic Society of Sarasota and Bradenton, Rising Tide International, Sarasota Hospice House, Second Church of Christ, St. Boniface Episcopal Church, St. Martha's Catholic Church, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Temple Beth El, Temple Beth Israel, Temple Beth Shalom, Temple Emmanuel and Unitarian Universalist Sarasota. For details, call the Center for Religious Tolerance at 312-9795.

From left, Lottie Crawford of First United Methodist Church; Andrea Blanch, founder, president and director of the Center for Religious Tolerance; and Arlene Pearlman of the Congregation of Humanistic Judaism. The next Women's Interfaith Network meeting will be from 4 to 6 p.m. Sept. 28 at the Pines of Sarasota, 1501 N. Orange Ave., Sarasota.

"I hope people recognize that our world is shifting quickly, that it is our responsibility to learn as much as we can about people of other cultures, other faiths," Blanch said. "It's particularly important for people to stay open to other religious traditions."

There is too much misinformation, stereotypes, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Christian discrimination, she said.

"There are individual organizations fighting against each form of discrimination, but we believe we have to stand together against this kind of hatred if we want to build a peaceful society," Blanch said.

While living in Sarasota, she travels around the world and to and from Israel, where she meets with clergy and people of various races and religions to spread her passion for peace.

Having an organized effort working for peace and tolerance is important, but Blanch said she believes accomplishing peace begins at home.

"I'd like people to know that you don't have to go to the Holy Land to be a peacemaker, she said. "There is so much you can do right here at home -- and it is really fun to get involved."

She was compelled to start the Center for Religious Tolerance after traveling in Israel after the second intifada started in 2000. Blanch saw Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Druze leaders working to bridge the gulf between their communities.

She began bringing peacemakers to Sarasota to speak. The number of people committed to the work grew with each sponsored activity. The group eventually incorporated and became a nonprofit organization.

"We have about 500 individual supporters across the country," Blanch said. "We also work in partnership with a number of organizations here and in Israel, including the Alliance for Middle East Peace, Jerusalem Peacemakers, Tent of Abraham, Trust-Emun, United Religions Initiative and others."

The Center for Religious Tolerance does not hold membership meetings; it sponsors events and keep everyone informed through newsletters and e-mails. The board of directors meets once a year in person and by conference call three times a year.

The Women's Interfaith Network meets four or five times a year in addition to hosting special events. Blanch formed the network after Elana Rozenman, an Orthodox Jewish woman from Jerusalem and one of CRT's partners, visited Sarasota a little more than a year ago.

"Her son was almost killed in a suicide bombing, but instead of becoming rageful, she started to bring together Muslim and Jewish women to begin healing each other from the violence," Blanch said.

The CRT mission states that what is done in Sarasota affects what happens to the rest of the planet, "and what happens globally affects us here at home," Blanch said. "We try to connect all of our international and local activities so that people can begin to feel that connection."

Almost 70 women have attended WIN's meetings or have asked to become a member. That is very important, said Blanch, who believes it's vital to have women involved when struggling for peace in the world.

"Women also carry the culture into the next generation," she said. "They tell the stories that shape the way their children will think and behave. I've seen miracles happening in Israel because women have started to build relationships across religious divides -- and once you know someone as a person, you don't want to go to war against them."

Contact Yvette Kimm at [yvettekimm@aol.com](mailto:yvettekimm@aol.com).

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