

Sharon teens gather in unique interfaith program to learn about Ramadan

By Janet Penn

On Dec. 12, the Anti Defamation League (ADL) Interfaith Youth Leadership Program, founded in memory of Robert A. Weaver, inaugurated its newest regional program in Sharon. The IYLP, currently in its fifth year, serves Jewish, Christian and Muslim high school students from the greater Boston metropolitan area. Its inception in Sharon marks the first of several planned regional programs to be created in the next few years.

The choice to locate the program in our town is a natural outgrowth of the ADL's involvement in Sharon following acts of vandalism directed at both Temple Adath Sharon and Temple Sinai during the holiday of Chanukah, 1998. Working hand in hand with the ADL, members of the Sharon clergy and community residents formed the group "Affirming Diversity, Celebrating Community". Together they planned a rally last spring and have continued with ongoing educational efforts, including gaining support from the town Selectmen to join the ADL's No Place for Hate campaign. Because of local interest in understanding and appreciating differences, and because of Sharon's religious diversity, the ADL chose Sharon as the site of the first community-based interfaith youth leadership program.

On the afternoon of December 12th, seventeen Jewish, Christian and Muslim teens gathered at the Islamic Center of New England on Chase Drive in Sharon. Each of the teens has made a commitment to meet one Sunday afternoon a month throughout the school year at different houses of worship in Sharon to learn about our respective faith traditions, to deepen our connections within our own faith, and to learn skills that will enable each of us to speak out against bigotry and hatred.

Together with facilitators Ilyse Braun (Young Israel), Kerry Payson (Our Lady of Sorrows), Syed Tanweer Zaidi (Islamic Center of New England) and Sharon senior and assistant facilitator Ashley Judge (OLOS), we learned many things. We found out where our families or ancestors came from. Part of two interfaith teams, we asked and answered many questions about our three religions. Why does the Catholic Church have a pope and what is the papal hierarchy? Who are the prophets in Islam? What is a havdalah set and how and why is it used? Who do you think were the three



Participants and facilitators of the ADL Sharon Interfaith Youth Leadership Program, including Imam Masood, spiritual leader of the Islamic Center of New England in Sharon, gather at the center during the Islamic festival of Ramadan.

most important people in the Old Testament and why? What are the different branches of Judaism, Christianity and Islam?

"We don't often talk about our religions," said participant Nilufer Ali. "I

We noticed that the flame brightened when the three wicks were intertwined

didn't know much about Christianity and today helped me to understand about the resurrection of Jesus and cleared up many things. Also, there are many stereotypes about Muslims in the newspapers and I wanted everyone to know that we are not terrorists." "It was really interesting to learn about Ramadan," said Caitlin Abber. "I was surprised by some of things that I didn't know about Judaism and Islam. It was also really nice to get to know everyone."

At the prescribed time, the Muslims prayed while the rest of the group observed. Afterwards, we had an opportunity to ask questions. "When I pray in Hebrew," one of the teens said, "I sort of know what I am saying. Is it like that for you?" "Why do Mus-

lim women cover their heads?" "Why doesn't the Imam face the worshipers when praying?" The questions and answers continued for forty five minutes.

Parents of the teens came before the end of the program and had an opportunity to learn about the Anti Defamation League and the goals and objectives of the IYLP. After question and answer, we re-joined the teens and listened while the Imam spoke about Islam and the month of Ramadan. "It was all very interesting to learn; I know a lot about Judaism but don't know a lot about Christianity and Islam. I learned more in the session than I ever have in classes!" said participant Melissa Freedman.

Each of us has made a commitment to meet once a month for an interfaith dialogue, but why did we choose to join the IYLP rather than spend time with our family and friends? I know that everyone in the room already has lives that are extremely busy and full. I believe that we joined together for many reasons. Perhaps in part because we had questions and were curious about other religious traditions. There was an "other" that we wanted to learn about. Perhaps in part because we wanted to combat some of the hopelessness we feel when confronted with the recent

hate crimes in Littleton and Laramie.

But perhaps it is also because we see that Sharon is in a unique position to make a statement against hatred and bigotry, to make a difference in a world often polarized by misinformation and hatred. As a small community with representatives from all three Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), we can join together working towards the ADL's vision of building a world based upon understanding and tolerance. We can learn about traditions and customs different from our own, we can learn to build bridges where none existed before, we can examine our own stereotypes, and we can learn tools that will help us have the courage to speak out when we are confronted with hatred or bigotry.

We concluded the program by passing a candle around and sharing one thing we learned during the day and one thing we hoped to learn in the coming months. As we joined three candles together at the closing, we noticed that the flame brightened when the three wicks were intertwined.

Janet Penn is Sharon ADL Interfaith Youth Leadership Program (IYLP) Coordinator