

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

What solidarity looks like: breaking bread and writing letters

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As I reflect on the year I have spent as Grand Valley State University's Interfaith Intern, I realize that one event in particular changed my life. On Jan. 27, the president signed an executive travel order, which some nicknamed the "Muslim ban." It would have prevented people from seven Muslim-majority countries from coming to the United States.

This same weekend, I was attending the Interfaith Leadership Institute held by the Interfaith Youth Core in Atlanta. At this conference, I was surrounded by around 250 other students and allies who work daily in promoting interfaith cooperation across religious difference.

As the news spread about the travel ban, students became visibly upset, shaken up and some were brought to tears. This could affect their friends and family not only overseas, but at local airports in the United States. It felt like flying may now be even more dangerous for people who wear their religion than ever before.



Sydney Watson is a 2016-17 interfaith intern. This is part of a series of column by the interns.

However, there was a benefit to being at this conference during this time as well. I was surrounded by people who would do whatever they could to help.

After discussions with students from West Michigan and across the country, we decided to host a Solidarity Dinner for our campus community at home. Our Better Together interfaith group partnered with Hillel, the Jewish student organization, and the Muslim Students Association and scheduled a dinner to be held only three days later.

The plan was simple. We would offer a space for people to share their thoughts, feelings and discomforts with others who were in the same space. After dinner, we invited attendees to write cards to the local mosques and incoming refugees.

Even with last minute planning and lit-

tle promotion, the night came and over 200 students, staff and faculty arrived. We received over 150 cards that were distributed to our local Muslim and refugee community in the following weeks.

The night of the Solidarity Dinner was the highlight of my year as the interfaith intern. Most importantly, it was an opportunity for people to be together. We all needed a space during this time where we could all feel accepted and loved. Students who showed up to this space asked what they could do to help, and were directed in hundreds of ways.

This dinner showed the potential power within a loving community, a group of committed individuals who will do whatever they need to do to stick up for one another.

The Solidarity Dinner model spread to other campuses, including Calvin College. Throughout this year, we have seen students stand up and support their neighbors again and again. These dinners and written letters have left me with continued hope as I walked away from those events.

Here is an example of a letter written by someone at a Solidarity Dinner that was

given to a refugee arriving in Michigan:

Dear Neighbor:

There is a place for you here. The headlines may say "banned," and some man may say he doesn't trust you and thinks ill of you; but you are my neighbor. And my neighbor, above all, you are loved. Neighbor, your home is here.

My friend, there is too much hate here and no words I say can shield you from that. But love will win, I tell you. As an African-American, darkness haunts me every day but the sun will rise tomorrow. Love can outshine it all, and I promise you it will. My friend, your home is here. Much like the story that got me where I can write to you today; there will be fights, and a group will resist, but I stand with you.

My neighbor, I want to welcome you here. I want to show you the sun rising. My neighbor, I want you to hold hope because, my neighbor, your home is rightfully here.

*With love,
Your Neighbor*

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