

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Interfaith challenges on a college campus

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Shelby Bruseloff is a graduate of Grand Valley State University.

When I was a sophomore at Grand Valley, I helped start a student organization on my campus.

At one of our meetings, a member announced an upcoming event. She said, "We're going to have the best Christmas party! There will be Christmas cookies, Christmas movies, Christmas sweaters and of course Secret Santa!" I remember saying to the girl next to me, "What about those who don't celebrate Christmas?"

I'm all for the Christmas spirit, but I felt excluded from this new community of mine. I decided that my contribution for this event would be a massive tray of latkes, or potato pancakes, that we eat on Hanukkah.

When the time came for everyone to line up and get their Christmas cookies, all of the girls whispered about the big tray full of something other than Christmas cheer. Finally someone shouted, "What're those?" And I replied with, "Well, since I don't celebrate Christmas, it would only be appropriate to share with you all a part of my religion. As I am Jewish, and tonight happens to be one of the nights of Hanukkah, I decided to bring you all latkes."

I talked with the girl who planned the program and worked with her in the future to come up with more inclusive programming.

Throughout my time as an undergraduate, it felt as though I was constantly explaining my religious identity; whether it be "what are latkes?" or "why are you always busy when we want to go out Friday night?" I was the first Jew many of my friends at school had ever met, and I was completely surprised by the level of ignorance displayed.

Even most of my professors had just as many questions as my peers had. They would ask me to share my thoughts as a Jew on whatever topics were being discussed, all in non-religious courses. While I was thankful to have a Jewish community on campus with Hillel so I could be connected to other Jewish students, I didn't want any minority religious student, who might not have the same support, to go through what I did.

That was when the Kaufman Interfaith Institute came into my life, and I was invited to join several other students at leadership training with the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago. This training helped me realize that this feeling of not belonging on my predominantly Christian campus is one that is felt throughout the country ... and students were actually doing something about it!

I went back to my campus filled with excitement and started an interfaith student organization. This led to my work with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute as an intern.

In my senior year research methods class, we developed a questionnaire for our fellow classmates. My question was, "Can you name three non-Christian religious holidays? If yes, please list." There were 18 students, and out of those only three said yes — and out of their nine answers, only three were correct.

I was so concerned about

the future of social workers and their culturally competency around religion that I decided to conduct my own research around this issue and was given the opportunity to present it to the School of Social Work faculty.

It was a strange moment to be discussing solutions to this issue with my professors, but also one of the best moments, as I felt confident that this was the right meeting to help social work students become more culturally competent. More importantly, it was the right meeting to ensure that students who were not Christian felt comfortable in their classrooms.

The School of Social Work ended up creating a class called "Experiencing Religious Pluralism in West Michigan," where students at the bachelor's and master's levels received an introduction to religious traditions, learned more about religion and social justice, and visited several places of worship. To see this kind of change continually motivates me that while I am young, I am capable of this work.

Since graduating in 2016, I've been working with 10 college campuses around Michigan to help grow and sustain their Jewish student life. I love the work that I do, and my favorite program is the interfaith Shabbat dinners. I truly value helping my students create the spaces to build relationships with students of all worldviews.

There's a quote by Hillel the Elder: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" I think of this quote when I'm working on college campuses with other administrators, faculty and staff.

When I look around the room in those meetings, I am typically one of a few women, the youngest, and the only one who is not Christian. Those in the meetings don't expect me to speak up, as they will seldom look to me or address me for whatever reason ... until I start talking.

Being a fresh face in the interfaith world doesn't stop me from speaking up about what is right. If I can start an interfaith student organization, if I can lead research on students' religious experiences, if I can help my students host campus-wide interfaith programming, I can most definitely sit at that table. And if I can, you can.

We need everyone's help to create inclusive, interfaith spaces. This goes beyond those belonging to Abrahamic traditions, men or women, young or old. With 2018 being the year of Interfaith Friendship, we need our LGBTQ friends, friends of color, our secular friends, our Jain friends, our Quaker and Hindu friends. Everybody has a seat at the table, and we are all ready to work together to ensure no one is left behind in this ever-growing interfaith society.

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