

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

We can be interfaith leaders in our everyday lives

Kevin McIntosh *Coordinator of Campus Interfaith Resources, Grand Valley State University*

Who is an interfaith leader? My mind goes to the greats. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Malala Yousafzai, Desmond Tutu and so many more. History makers who helped push for social justice and made the world a better place. Folks who were able to use their religious traditions to build bridges and work with people of other worldviews. Men and women who had appreciative knowledge of other traditions, a vision and skill to build on social capital.

But can one be an interfaith leader in one's everyday job?

These larger than life figures are vital in the current interfaith realm. But, every once in a while, this scares me. These folks have dedicated their lives to becoming interfaith leaders; how can I live up to that expectation? I hear that same fear in the voices of my students, those who want to get involved in interfaith but don't see themselves working in a church or a temple or a mosque when they graduate.

I hear students say that unless their vocation calls them to be a leader in their house of worship, interfaith isn't for them. How about those whose passions are in law, education, finance? Do they know that in their role they can also be interfaith leaders? What do we mean when we use terms like leader or leadership?

I recently took an online course hosted by Eboo Patel, founder and president of interfaith Youth Core. He says that interfaith leaders have three things. They have appreciative knowledge of other traditions, they have a clear vision of their own goals, and they have the skills to bring people of different traditions together. One doesn't need to work in a religious institution to have knowledge, vision and skills and push for change. In fact, Patel highlighted several IFYC alumni who are in various occupations and use their interfaith skills every day.

One of them, Kinza Khan, is a lawyer in Chicago who got involved with interfaith in college and then went on to be a domestic violence lawyer. She currently works for a firm providing legal services and advocacy, where she pushes for social justice on the front line. On the outside, it might not seem like a typical place to do interfaith. But Khan says she uses it every time she talks to clients, recognizing that their religious, spiritual or secular tradition might impact how they live.

She describes how most of her clients are women and often immigrants or minorities. She says, "I found that being a young, minority woman myself helped me build rapport with them. They often asked me where I was from or how I got into this field, and I believe they felt more comfortable discussing sensitive issues with me, including issues of sexual and domestic violence."

Outside of her work, Khan is deeply committed to her Muslim community. She takes time out to serve as educator and trainer for an organization that provides education about, and advocacy regarding, issues of sexual health and sexual violence in Muslim-American communities.

Khan will be on Grand Valley State University's Allendale campus March 11, to talk about how her student interfaith activity has led her to be a better lawyer and an interfaith leader in her profession, by being more understanding of and sensitive to her clients. She also discusses how ethnic and religious minorities need to respond to the biases that exist in various professions. Check out her TED talk at bit.ly/kinzahkan.

Another IFYC alum, Skyler Oberst, a student at Eastern Washington University, tells how his interfaith commitment began during his freshman year.

"It was one of those days in February when it's overcast, it's been overcast for like six months now, a lot of snow on the ground, and it was just a really down day," he recalls. He saw a flyer displaying the Golden Rule from the texts of three religious traditions. In



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We all have spheres of influence where we have the ability to lead. How will you use yours to be an interfaith leader?



Kinza Khan, a domestic violence lawyer in Chicago, will give the Rabbi Sigal Memorial Lecture at Grand Valley State University on March 11. Submitted

IF YOU GO

Rabbi Sigal Memorial Lecture

What: 'Interfaith Leadership in the 21st Century'

Who: Kinza Khan

When: 4 p.m. March 11

Where: Grand Valley State University Kirkhof Center, 10670 S Campus Dr.

More info: interfaithunderstanding.org

his excitement, he shared it with his philosophy of religion class, but was disappointed in their lack of interest. After class, he retraced his steps to find the flyer, only to find that it had been ripped to pieces. Oberst also remembered that Muslim students were being harassed on campus and knew he had to act.

He recalls thinking, "I really (have) to do something" — not only as a Christian, but also as someone who needs to speak up for the rights of everybody." After picking up most of the flyer's remnants, Oberst brought the pieces to his professor, and said, "Look, you saw this flyer as well. Look what happened. We need to do something."

This was the beginning of his interfaith leadership on campus. That led to the launch of a "Meet the Neighbors Campaign," which taught the community how to visit and meet their neighbors. After graduation, Oberst has continued his interfaith leadership in the city of Spokane.

Last week at the Abrahamic Dinner, we had a large turnout to hear students from three West Michigan colleges describe their experiences of applying their own faith traditions to expanding interfaith understanding.

These folks remind us that interfaith leadership can be in small everyday leadership opportunities. I ask, how will you build bridges across divisions? We all have spheres of influence where we have the ability to lead. How will you use yours to be an interfaith leader?

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