



Allie Egrin, left, a Jewish student from Grand Valley State University; Alley LoPrete, center, a Christian student from Hope College; and Tuba Jaherun, a Muslim student from Calvin College. Submitted

#### INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Listening to new voices: College students speak

**Kevin McIntosh** *Coordinator, Campus Interfaith Resources, GVSU*

*Editor's Note: This week begins a special series on listening to the voices of area college students. Kevin McIntosh, the coordinator of Campus Interfaith Resources at Grand Valley State University introduces the three students who will be featured in the coming weeks.*



**Kevin McIntosh is the coordinator of Interfaith Resources at Grand Valley State University.**

What do college students think about interfaith?

College is a great place for students to build bridges. Students from various backgrounds (racial, gender, sexual orientation, class and worldviews) live, eat and learn together. This "civic laboratory" allows students to learn from the lived experience of people different from themselves.

Unfortunately, the world of higher education is not immune to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of oppression. From swastikas being painted on or near Jewish fraternities, to Muslim ablution rooms being destroyed, the same hate-filled rhetoric that is outside the academic bubble can seep into this heterogeneous neighborhood. Inspired students push back against this hateful rhetoric and create spaces for real, confident pluralism.

In the next three weeks, we turn over the pen to three amazing college students who will explore how their faith and their work in interfaith have influenced their college experience: Allie Egrin, a Jewish student from Grand Valley State University; Alley LoPrete, a Christian student from Hope College; and Tuba Jaherun, a Muslim student from Calvin College. They come from different religious traditions, different years in school and a variety of interfaith experiences. I hope you will be inspired by their wit, experience and commitments.

Beyond those three, there also are students who are thinking about food insecurity, creating systemic change about gender identity and leading the charge in racial justice work. Every August, hundreds of students gather in Chicago for the Interfaith Youth Core's Interfaith Leadership Institute. The students explore how to have difficult conversations, how to share their interfaith stories and how to bring interfaith activism back to their campus. They will learn how to be bridge-builders in a world that wants to build silos. They will come back to their campuses and be change-makers working to impact their campus to make it more interfaith friendly.

Reflecting on this past year shows the amazing work our local college students are doing. Last fall, 40 students from seven different campuses attended Our Made in Michigan Interfaith Lab in partnership with the Interfaith Youth Core. Our students at Grand Valley hosted the first interfaith week, looking to celebrate religious diversity on campus; students at Calvin explored what it means to be a religious minority at a Christian college; at Hope, they thought about how interfaith is seen in various private sectors; and at Aquinas they looked at how community service plays into interfaith relationships.

As I re-read the articles from our three students, one thing really struck me. Each

of these students are bridge-builders. When the three penned their experience, they didn't know each other or talk to each other beforehand. And yet, the three of them share many similarities in their experiences.

Tuba Jaherun, a Muslim sophomore from Calvin, writes about one of her first experiences interacting with someone of a different worldview: Ci, an atheist. While they "argued about God the whole time," the major thing she remembers is that they would go on rides at theme parks and share peach iced tea. At the end of the summer, this friendship did not weaken her faith; in fact, Tuba's relationship with Islam became stronger.

Alley LoPrete, our Kruienza Interfaith Intern and a Christian at Hope, talks about "holy envy." This idea from Krister Stendahl challenges us to see practices of other traditions and think about how we can emulate them, or seek to include them in our own practice. Alley writes about her holy envy of the Islamic prayers and the Jewish Shabbat service. She writes about how she used her friendships with people from these traditions to give her own worship more power.

Allie Egrin, a Grand Valley senior and president of the Jewish organization Hillel, writes about how she became friends with students in the largest Christian organization, Campus Ministry. And how she worked with some of her Christian friends to start a Bible study where they studied the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible. Allie writes that "being able to gather with some of my closest friends once a week to openly discuss our struggles, our needs, our G-d, and pray for one another was incredibly genuine, uplifting, and indescribable."

These themes also are seen in their lived experience. Allie's leadership of Hillel and creating partnerships with GVSU's Muslim Student Association and other religious groups, along with Alley's work doing interfaith at the Al Amana Center in Oman, and Tuba's work explaining Islam on Calvin's historically Christian campus, are powerful examples. None of them needed to be bridge-builders; they could have tucked away in their own religious communities and isolated themselves from people whom they could see as "the other." Instead, they reached out and built friendships while growing more committed to their own traditions.

In the next three weeks, take some time to reflect. How will you build bridges across the various religious, secular and spiritual communities that make up West Michigan? How will you contribute to this pluralistic community? It could be by attending a Kaufman event, or reading a book about a different tradition. I challenge you — just as our three college students challenge me — to go out and do the good work of meeting your neighbor and creating new friendships.

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