



COURTESY YASMINE TAEB

Painting the Town: From organized inter-faith dialogues to messages on Gainesville's wall of free speech, students learned religious tolerance and sent a visual message.

When it comes to talking about differences of faith, sometimes it seems like people may never agree. But where some people see problems, others see solutions. Meet two **University of Florida** students, one Muslim and one Jewish, whose efforts brought positive communication to their campus.

Making Her Faith Heard

by *Lindsay Downey, associate editor*

Just like long-lost relatives, members of the University of Florida's religious community are coming together for a campus-wide family reunion. Through the student group Gators for Humanity, faith family members are re-opening the doors for communication and peace, uniting from all different religions.

Gators for Humanity co-founder Yasmine Taeb says university faith groups had been estranged for too long. "Jews and Muslims were considered to be cousins," she says. "But we didn't have that human connection as seeing each other as human beings. We didn't have any sort of bond."

Taeb says she was inspired to create a faith-based leadership group while participating in the UF Jewish Student Union's Sukkot Survivor competition, which aims to educate students about the Sukkot—the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles during which Jews traditionally live in small dwellings to celebrate the fall harvest and wandering during the Exodus. Taeb, a Muslim, invited fellow Islamic students to participate and learn more about the Jewish faith, as well as several other religions. After living eight days in the Sukkah, Taeb emerged the competition's winner, earning a trip to London for her dedication in promoting spiritual awareness.

Although she's been active in both high school and college, taking on leadership positions such as high school class treasurer,

Taeb says she never dreamt she'd be spearheading a religious leadership group. She admits she didn't have an in-depth knowledge of Islam as a high school student. "I knew the basic tenets about my faith, but I was growing up in a mainly Jewish area, where there weren't any Muslim people," she says. "When I went to UF, I wasn't even thinking about getting involved in a

The Dialogue of Faith

Creating a spiritual dialogue on campus

Muslim group, but I took a class to learn about my faith, and I saw a lot of racism."

Taeb decided the time had come for campus faiths to congregate. Inspired and determined, she began organizing Gators for Humanity on the UF campus.

Taeb focused the faith-based group on principles of world peace and tolerance, while working to promote education among religions. "We wanted to form a group that was aimed at preventing atrocities happening across the globe," she says. "Our concern was basically humanity and the violation of human rights and what's going on in the Middle East."

Through organized inter-faith dialogues, students learned religious tolerance and answered questions about their spirituality. And they weren't doing it alone. Humanity members turned to various religious groups—their sister organizations—for help. "We considered it kind of like an umbrella group, so we had several groups beneath us, working with us," Taeb says, adding that

Bahais, Jews, Muslims, and Christians all worked to support the cause. "We would come together and we would basically go through the main causes of our faiths, what we believe, and students would ask questions," Taeb says. Gators for Humanity was successful in educating people to understand alternate religious views and in breaking stereotypes that existed among different faiths.

As the organization began its second year, tragic events changed the world, and Gators for Humanity doubled up its efforts. "When the events of Sept. 11 happened, we wanted to do something to bring the campus together because the Muslim students felt they were being harassed and persecuted for the event," Taeb says. "One of my personal friends was wearing a head covering, and she said that a couple of times on the day after Sept. 11, people called her derogatory terms and harassed her."

The day after 9/11, Taeb wrote an article condemning the attack in the university's newspaper. Gators for Humanity also organized a peace rally. Hundreds of students from a plethora of religious backgrounds walked from the Islamic Center to St. Augustine's Church and then to the Jewish Center. "It was really touching, how everyone came together," Taeb says. "There was only a three-day notice for the rally and it wasn't just students—everyone came out—faculty and parents as well." Eventually, with the help of the peace rally and other Humanity-

sponsored events, the post-9/11 racism on campus began to diminish. "A lot of it had to do with the fact that we were very outspoken about it. We always had information tables set up with Islam on Campus, where students could ask questions about faith and terrorism," Taeb says. "It did get better as far as the whole Sept. 11 thing went, but I think there's still a lot of racism out in the world."

Taeb is still working to combat that racism. Now attending law school at **Georgetown University**, a recent trip to Iran inspired her to implement plans for another faith-based leadership group. "Upon returning from my trip to Iran, and after speaking to dozens of professors and students at the **University of Tehran**, I realized how vital it is to establish a cultural and inter-faith dialogue between the students in Iran and the United States, particularly because of the lack of diplomatic relations between the two nations," she says.

Taeb plans to start working in the human rights division of the U.S. State Department's International Organization Affairs Bureau. In addition, she's been



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awarded the Pickering Fellowship by the State Department for her work in inter-faith and cultural dialogues, through which she'll serve as a U.S. diplomat after completing her master's degree in International Affairs with a concentration in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies.

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Connecting Kibbutz to Campus

by Jenna Tighe

When lost or far from home, homing pigeons are capable of finding their way back from hundreds of miles away. Much like a homing pigeon, Rachel Elias found her way back to her spiritual home in Israel from nearly across the globe. Even when she returned to the United States, she kept Israel close to her heart.

"In Israel, I have a whole branch of my family—basically, all of the women married and stayed there with their families," Elias says. "So, it's always been ingrained in me to help and learn more about Israel."

At the age of 9, Elias' mother signed her up for a new sleep-away camp that was affiliated with the Young Judea youth group. She stayed involved with the group and spent her entire first year of college in Israel participating in its freshman study abroad program.

"The goal of the program is to get to see all the ways you can be a part of Israel and see the different kinds of lifestyles there are there. That's why we spent time in a kibbutz and a development town and in a regular city like Jerusalem. It was to really get a sense of what everyday life is like there. We've learned so much back home, and we now had time to really get to see it first hand," she says.

During her time in Israel, Elias studied all aspects of Israeli life including its history, culture, geography, and politics and volunteered countless hours to local causes.

"The exciting part is that I lived in Jerusalem for a time, I lived in the desert, I lived up in the north, and in all of these places, I was getting exposure to Israeli culture and Israeli way of life," Elias says.

When Elias entered the University of Florida as a sophomore in 1998, she wanted to get involved on campus and hold onto her culture. At first, she was discouraged by the general indifference of UF's student body. Her friend Stacey Gross suggested the pair create a club that would allow people to participate in Israeli cultural activities.

In order to receive Student Government funding, Elias and Gross went to the student union and officially registered their club, which they named Gators for Israel. The harder part came when they began to organize the direction the club would take.

"It was a lot of brainstorming with other people that had been to Israel before or were in a situation similar to ours—that they were interested in doing these things but felt like there wasn't a base for it," Elias says. "But soon enough, we had a core

group of people who then brought their friends, and it built up from there."

Elias' goal was to develop the organization to be more cultural than the politically minded clubs the JSU had typically enveloped before. "For people who wanted to talk to other people about Israel or get involved or learn more about Israel, there'd be an outlet for them," Elias says.

The group planned cultural events like Israel's Independence Day celebrations and Memorial Day events. "In Israel, Memorial Day is the day before Independence Day," Elias says. "It's very important to remember the fallen soldiers and commemorate their achievements, and then celebrate their accomplishments the next day." GFI annually sponsors a celebration at Gainesville's Swamp Restaurant to observe the holidays. Everyone's welcome to join in on the party, and GFI even encourages non-members to attend the festivities.

They also organize coffee houses to bring bits of Israeli culture to the students. During a recent social, GFI set up a tent on the UF Reitz Union's lawn where the participants can eat traditional Israeli foods, read Israeli poems, play music, and sing Israeli songs.

The second year Elias was at UF, she volunteered to organize the annual Sukkot project among the JSU, the school of architecture, university administration, and a private architect who provided the necessary funding. Sukkots are the booths built during the Jewish holiday of the same name to commemorate the final harvest of the year.

In 2000-2001 Elias ran for JSU president and won. During her presidency, violence between Israelis and Arabs erupted in Israel. UF chose Elias to be its student representative to visit Israel for one week and show the United States' continued support. Along with other student representatives, she met with Israeli officials and the prime

minister during their stay to discuss the steps for peace.

"There was an immediate sense of urgency that we should get people to go to show the American solidarity with Israel," Elias says. "It was really a public support for Israel during a time of violence, especially in Jerusalem."

Back home, as JSU president, Elias created an inter-faith panel to build bonds between the JSU and other cultural and religious groups. During the panel presentation, three Jews, three Christians, and three Muslims, all from different sects or denominations within their religions, took the stage to speak about their traditions and customs and field questions from the audience. JSU has since put on the inter-faith panel every semester since Elias created it.

"The people in the audience are always amazed at how similar a lot of their faiths are. The panel means that JSU programmers are dealing with other organizations well, and they're making bonds," Elias says. "Unfortunately, we had to test those bonds after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. We held a number of different memorial services and did things together to show the strength of the religious community as a whole in this area, not just the Jewish community."

She now has taken on an advisory role in the clubs that meant the most to her as an undergrad. Since she's currently pursuing masters degrees in architecture and real estate from UF, she's limited her participation to JSU, Florida Cicerones, and Florida Blue Key.

"I'm getting two masters degrees, so it keeps me here longer than other people," Elias says. "So, because I'm still here, I've found that the current JSU president or the president last year ask me to advise them of what I would do in their situations in an advisory capacity."

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Love Is in the House: Gators for Israel members and friends pack the house in the booth built to celebrate Sukkot, an annual Jewish commemoration of the year's final harvest.



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