

Our Spirit

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Play organizers hope to bring all the children of Abraham together

DAVID CRUMM



• Sometimes tiny sparks trigger bombs; sometimes they light candles. As stories about conflict and terrorism explode on the front page each week, consider for a moment a different kind of news story. It's about a local Muslim cleric who shared the spark of an idea with a Jewish friend over lunch last year. In turn, the friend used that spark to kindle creative energy in dozens of teenagers, religious leaders, theater professionals and university scholars.

At 8 p.m. Saturday, "The Children of Abraham Project" will debut with a diverse troupe of young performers at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre at Maple and Drake roads in West Bloomfield. This drama, written partly by Muslim, Jewish and Christian kids, is expected to spark fresh dialogue across old barriers. From the premiere, the project will expand into a series of performances across Michigan, and perhaps across the United States, aided by the University of Michigan's Arts of Citizenship program in Ann Arbor.

"This started with an idea I shared over lunch with my friend Brenda Rosenberg," Imam Abdullah El Amin, head of the Muslim Center in Detroit, said this week. "We were talking about all the problems in the world that involve Muslims and Jews and Christians. And I said, 'If we would only remember that we all share the same father, Abraham, we might find ways to bring our family back together again.'"

El Amin pointed to a passage in the Bible in which Abraham's long-separated sons, Ishmael and Isaac, come together at Abraham's death to bury their father. El Amin said to his friend, "We're tearing our world apart today. Why can't we do what Ishmael and Isaac did and come back together as a family?"

That set Rosenberg's mind churning over ways to help Abraham's descendants reunite. A longtime peace activist, she even dreamed about the fresh idea that night. "And in my dream, I saw Isaac and Ishmael on a stage. I saw the idea for a children of Abraham project."

The project's core concept was to bring together teenagers from all three faiths, ask them to share their life stories, weave those stories into a play, then plan a short workshop to be held after the play to give audiences a chance to join



RICHARD LEE/Detroit Free Press

Araz Hashami, 18, of Warren and Adam Harris, 15, of Detroit play brothers Ishmael and Isaac in a rehearsal of "The Children of Abraham Project" on Wednesday. The play will debut Saturday.

in the discussion that the kids start onstage.

Rick Sperling, head of the Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit, joined the project as soon as Rosenberg described it to him.

"The play's subtitle says a lot: 'Muslim, Jewish and Christian Teenagers Uniting for Peace in the Shadow of 9/11 and the Middle East Conflict.' This project really is a trampoline to launch discussion in a new way with people sitting in the theater," Sperling said. So, as dozens of teenagers were recruited to work on the project, Sperling's theater hosted their meetings and rehearsals.

The kids were excited, said Ariella Lis, a Jewish teenager from Farmington Hills. "We were just thirsting each week to learn all these new things from other kids in the group," she said.

Ann Arbor-based playwright Rachel Urist agreed to spend several months weaving the kids' ideas into a script. She said, "What's going on in the world can seem so hopeless that it was thrilling to be able to contribute to peace in such a concrete way."

Detroit-based blues-and-folk musician Josh White Jr. also joined the project and will help lead the post-play discussion Saturday. Volunteering his time was an easy choice, he said. "Anything that helps us realize we're one

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

LAST WEEK: We asked about conflict and cooperation between the realms of religion and education.

Running through nearly all of the comments was an assumption that the two disciplines can benefit from each other. Readers said educational programs can strengthen a person's faith and public school courses in history, social studies and philosophy don't make sense without including the impact of faith on world cultures.

There's a free opportunity from 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday at Marygrove College, 8425 W. McNichols in Detroit, to witness that kind of cooperation. "Manipulating Life: Where Do We Go from Here?" is a symposium

on genetic research, cosponsored by the National Conference for Community and Justice and a grant from the Templeton Foundation.

Medical experts as well as Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians will discuss the moral implications of genetic techniques in research and treatment.

THIS WEEK: "The Children of Abraham Project" includes stories about family customs. As we approach Passover and Easter, tell us about a family tradition related to faith that is important to you. E-mail ourspirit@freepress.com or call 313-222-1456.

people, one planet — that's what I'm about," he said.

Soon, a host of community groups and the U-M program were cosponsors, agreeing to help send the project into schools, theaters and houses of worship over the next two years.

This week, El Amin chuckled as we talked about the explosion of optimism that came from his tiny spark. "It just shows what

can happen if we sit down together and look for ideas on the positive side of life — and latch onto what we find there with a real passion," he said.

► Seats are available for the Saturday show, but tickets must be purchased by 3 p.m. today by calling 248-788-2900. Admission is \$20.