

The power of sisterhood enriches souls, shatters stereotypes, boundaries

Written by Michelle H. Daino For the Home News Tribune May 21

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A great divide often exists between people of different beliefs, creating misunderstanding, confusion, stereotypes and sometimes hatred. But, two brave women — Sheryl Olitzky and Atiya Aftab — are determined to forge a sturdy bridge over that divide between the Jewish and Muslim faiths through a community they formed, The Sisterhood of Salaam/Shalom.

“After I had returned from a trip to Poland, I had a burning need to do something meaningful and lasting to rid the world of hate and never again let hate take over,” Olitzky said. “It took me several months to come up with the idea of starting up a Muslim/Jewish women’s group. I knew there were so many Muslims and Jews in the area, but there was an absence of communication and relationship building amongst each other. “I wanted the group to consist of just women as women navigate the world through relationships.”

Olitzky’s mission prompted her to contact the Imam from the Islamic Society of Central Jersey, who gave her Aftab’s name and telephone number. “I was adamant that I did not want this group to be associated with any mosque, synagogue or institution,” Olitzky said. “This was to be a group of women that could operate as they saw best fit without having to worry about institutional guidelines or politics.”

Approximately three years ago, the two women met at a coffee shop and it was as if they had known each other their whole lives. “We quickly saw that our beliefs, practices and values were the same,” Olitzky said. “We had more in common than not. We each invited five other women to become part of the group.”

Melting pot of strength

The Sisterhood of Salaam/Shalom, which was officially founded in the summer of 2010, is now 12 women strong. Half of the women are Muslim and the other half Jewish. The members are from South Brunswick, North Brunswick, Franklin Park, Highland Park and Milltown.

The Sisterhood recently just together a group in the Princeton area and has been asked to start one in the Highland Park/Edison area. The organization hopes to have as many groups of Muslim and Jewish women meeting together as possible throughout the U.S.

“While my friendship with Sheryl was formed so seamlessly, forming the larger Sisterhood took thought,” Aftab said. “I wanted to select women who represented the diversity of Muslim women. “The Muslim women are from different ethnic backgrounds (Indian, Egyptian, Pakistani, European, Palestinian, etc.), as well as different educational and professional backgrounds. However, they all share a desire to make the world a better place and they do so actively and they share the objective of raising their children as practicing Muslims and excellent human beings.”

The Sisterhood of Salaam/Shalom meets in members’ homes on average every four to six weeks. Gatherings range from watching movies, the celebration of respective holidays, sharing in family events or just chatting. “Once we get started, it is hard to end a get-together,” Olitzky said. “We never want our time together to end.” “The evenings pass so quickly,” Aftab said, adding that the members discuss a range of topics from “comparative religion issues, cultural challenges, gender challenges, politics and community issues to family joys, challenges and holidays.”

Blending traditions

Learning from one another's unique traditions and cultures during the holidays has created a deep sense of respect and enthusiasm among the Sisterhood. Olitzky, who had never experienced Ramadan, said that her celebration with the Sisterhood enriched her understanding and appreciation for the holiday.

"We all try to be sensitive to each other when there is a holiday coming up so that we can send the appropriate greetings," she added. "I have learned so much about the Jewish holidays that Sheryl's family celebrates from Sukkot to Passover to Chanukkah," Aftab said. "Sheryl and her husband, Kerry, have been so kind to invite us to their home to share in these celebrations. We have learned about Jewish prayers and traditions, and we have enjoyed traditional foods. "When we speak of our holidays, we find so many commonalities. From our fast in Ramadan to the fast of Yom Kippur. Sheryl and I also share a love of decorating our homes for our holidays, making our environment reflect our celebration with festivity and bringing joy to our family and friends."

A family affair

Olitzky had the support of her husband from the beginning of the Sisterhood's conception. "He very much enjoys spending time with my Muslim sisters' spouses," she said. "He really likes them personally and finds the conversations always intellectually challenging. "Since my kids are all grown, I live for when my Muslim sisters get together with me and their kids. I adore their whole families and it is so wonderful that their kids see what their moms are doing."

Aftab recognizes the impact that Olitzky and her Jewish friends in the Sisterhood have had on her family. "My husband enjoys the company and conversation of our new friends and we have in turn found common friends and colleagues," she said. "Sheryl is so loving and considerate to my kids. She always has special foods and treats for them and, even when they are not present at our get-togethers, she always sends goodies home for them and they are very appreciative. "My kids have sensed this genuine love and concern and always look forward to meeting Sheryl and Kerry and all of our new friends," she said. "My family has also enjoyed the films we have shared together and we look forward to many more celebration and events in the future."

Once a sister, always a sister

"We are so happy that these wonderful Muslim women and the five wonderful women that Sheryl introduced us to have formed a genuine sisterhood of friendship," Aftab said. "We felt a palpable connection and energy at our first get-together almost three years ago. "We feel that true understanding between people of the Jewish faith and Muslim faith will come about when we form relationships — friendships — with one another. Our country affords us to live and work side by side with people of different faiths, ethnicities, etc. These differences are meant not to be an impediment but should be a reason to get to know each other."

"All 12 of us are very different from each other in where we are from, level of religious observance and family structure," Olitzky added. "But, as we have proven, it doesn't matter that we are different, because inside our hearts, we are all very much the same. "It (forming the Sisterhood) has been one of the greatest things that I have ever done. I adore these women and have developed friendships that are long lasting. In the process, I have learned so much about myself and about Islam."