

Teaching tolerance

Two Rancho Santa Margarita religious schools take part in an interfaith education effort.

By ALEJANDRA MOLINA STAFF WRITER

In a society where religion can be a sensitive subject, sometimes all it takes is a couple of young eager minds to break the ice.

To learn more about each other's faiths, students from Rancho's Morasha Jewish Day School, St. John's Episcopal School and Irvine's New Horizon Islamic Elementary School will interact with each other, engage in hands-on activities, and create art and poetry pieces over the next few weeks.

The fourth through eighth grade students are taking part in a semester-long study of Christianity, Islam and Judaism orchestrated by the Anti-Defamation League Orange County/ Long Beach Region's Jerusalem Sky Project.

Tuesday, Sept. 19, was the first meeting, in a series of four that focused on the Muslim faith at New Horizon in Irvine.

"We're practically the same," Diana Kalaji said, a sixth grader from New Horizon who learned her Jewish and Christian peers have a holy book as well, and believe in some of the same prophets.

The visiting students learned that Muslims believe in one God, and they pray five times a day.

They learned "Islam" is the religion and "Muslim" is a person who follows Islam, and that Muslims believe in angels, prophets, a day of judgment and a holy book.

After the lecture on the introduction of Islam, students played a game to share their common interests, despite their different religious backgrounds.

Whether they have the same color of hair, like to read, or like broccoli, the game got the students talking about "kid stuff."

"Kids aren't really conscious of the politics that goes into friendships. It's not about the person's faith," said New Horizon's head, Dina Eletreby.

Muslim students also prayed as the other students watched and some even participated.

Eletreby said that after Sept. 11, she believes it is vital for people to be knowledgeable about the Muslim faith.

"Without understanding, you have fear, and fear is usually the precursor to violence and hate," Eletreby said. "It's hugely important for kids to understand how common we are and to respect and appreciate our differences."

Eve Fein of Morasha believes that tolerance should start at an early age.

"One of the most important values for the young generation is to be open and accepting of different views, ideas and faiths," Fein said.

She said, "I don't think I am exaggerating to say that these issues are of global significance."

Students will meet next at Morasha Jewish Day School on Oct. 12 and will meet on Nov. 8 at St. John's Episcopal School, both in Rancho Santa Margarita. At the end of the

program, students will exhibit poetry and art from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Nov. 27 at Rancho Santa Margarita's Bell Tower.

"We're not very different," said Benjamin Siegel, a sixth grader from Morasha.

"I learned a lot about the Muslim religion and enjoyed meeting others," said Madison Jaros, a sixth grade student from St. John's.

This year Muslims in Irvine began the Ramadan fast on Saturday, Sept. 23.

Ramadan commemorates the month in which the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. During this time, Muslims fast daily from dawn to sunset to develop piety and self-restraint.

Source: www.islamicity.com/ramadan/ The basic tenets of Islam are outlined in the "Five Pillars" of Islam. They are:

1) The Declaration of Faith - One becomes a Muslim by saying, "There is no deity but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." 2) Prayer - Muslims perform five prayers each day. Prayer is a direct link between the worshiper and God.

3) Zakat - Muslims believe all things belong to God. Zakat, or charitable giving, "purifies" wealth by setting aside a portion for those in need.

4) Fasting - The fast is another method of self-purification.

5) Pilgrimage - A pilgrimage to Mecca, or Hajj, is an obligation for those who are physically or financially able. Source: www.cair-net.org **PHOTOS BY ROD VEAL**
staff photographer

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LEARNING EARLY: New Horizon students Hana Khan, from left, Zara Ahmed, and Noelle Awaida participate in a school prayer that was witnessed by students from Morasha Jewish Day and St. John's Episcopal schools to enhance religious understanding.



GETTING ALONG: Training specialist Vanessa Puniak, talks with local Jewish, Muslim and Christian students to teach skills in religious tolerance.



ICEBREAKER: Heba Sairafe, left, and fifth grader Zachary Lehrich, play a game to learn about each other's religion.



SALAH: Students from Rancho's St. John's Episcopal school participate in the traditional style of Muslim prayer with students from New Horizon Elementary school.



PRAYER TIME: Students from Irvine's New Horizon, begin one set of their five daily prayers.



PLAY TIME: St. John's sixth grader Emily Woods, is assisted by New Horizon's fifth grader Iman Labaniah, left, in unraveling a tether ball from its pole.