

Building Community Across the Lines of Race, Culture, and Religious Faith

It began with a phone call.

Bisharo Iman, a local college student, was looking for people in the wider community who shared her concern about an anti-Muslim graffiti incident.

She called Amber Evenson, Human Rights Coordinator for the city of St Cloud, who networked her to several community organizations, including our Center.



Bisharo Iman

We knew of two teachers at Cathedral High School whose courses seemed a good match – Sandy Baldwin (social justice course [11th grade]) and Becky Van Ness (World Religions).

In early January, Bisharo and two of her friends (ZamZam and Amina) spent a day at CHS, and the experience was transformative for many of the students. (A number who heard them speak in morning classes asked permission from other teachers to be able to spend more time with them later in the day.)

A couple of weeks later, when the CHS students learned about a town-hall meeting at City Hall to address the incident, over 40 of them decided to attend, to learn more and to demonstrate their solidarity.



CHS students at town-hall meeting

When AnnElise Edeburn, youth minister at First United Methodist Church, heard about these students' experiences, she imagined a similar opportunity for a conversation with her youth group.



Students visiting after the formal session ended at FUMC

Eventually, Bisharo, ZamZam, Amina and several others (including Somali students currently at Tech HS) spent two evenings with the FUMC group.



The conversations continuing

In an article in her church's newsletter, AnnElise wrote:

"These young women was so generous in welcoming our questions and patient in responding to them. Many assumptions were clarified as we learned about Ramadan, daily prayers, and various aspects of Somali culture and Islamic faith. . . ."

We heard that, as hard as it is to persevere amid the racism and hatred [they encounter], they never consider dropping out of school . . . it is simply what they are most grateful here in St Cloud. . . .

At the end of [the second evening], youth . . . both Somali and non-Somali, circled in spontaneous groups to continue their conversations informally. I eventually had to send them all on their way, but I hope the conversations they started here have continued in the halls at high school, and that just a few more people can now call one another by name as they walk on a bit of new common ground.

[An interesting postscript: Amina and ZamZam were involved in activities related to our conferences while in high school.]