

RELIGION

Differences are what bind this group of teenagers

By Jayme Fraser

HC It started in a van to Austin this fall.

Seven teens from different religious backgrounds filled three rows of seats on an early September morning. They knew Houston was a diverse city, knew people should be celebrated

for their differences and knew people who truly believe in their faith should scream it from a mountain top. Most are high school upperclassmen who could name the Abrahamic religions and probably write an A-earning essay comparing them.

At least they thought

they knew those things. They witnessed Houston's diversity, but rarely sought to understand it.

Issues raised in the vice-presidential debate the night before the trip to the state Capitol initiated the first faith discussion, moving from views on same-sex marriage to

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High school students Habeeb Hooshmand, left, Asha Jones and Hilario Lumbreras are building an interfaith community

Program a model for handling diversity

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silent versus chanted meditation. At the Capitol, they asked legislators, lobbyists and aides what role they thought religion plays in their lives and how it influences government. On the trip home, they asked each other questions that often were too uncomfortable to ask until they joined Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston's new leadership program, iLead.

"I'm gonna get so much hate for this, but why is there evil in the world?" asked Habeeb Hooshmand, a debate-loving Muslim who usually speaks first and loudest.

"We can't have good without evil," said Lily Gross, a Jewish lacrosse player, who often mediated.

"God's plan for us is good, but He gives us the will to choose," said Asha Jones, a bubbly Methodist.

"We all have good in us, but how much will we use it? Scripture taught us how to express all of it," Habeeb said, naturally guiding the discussion.

"Hilaro, you're going to pee yourself, so go ahead."

Everyone laughed.

"Evil does actually exist," said Hilario Lumberras, an ever polite Catholic. "Let's say I wanted to kill someone."

Everyone laughed again.

"I don't!" Hilario said before continuing. "I'm filled with hatred, I'm not filled with good. If I'm not filled with good there's more room for evil."

"In Buddhism, there is no good or evil," the shy Buddhist Reece Buck said. "You meditate to analyze your problems and fix things. We see hell as actual mindsets you go through everyday, the seven hells."

"Wherever life takes them, they'll have those experiences that make them people who are respectful of others and can leverage our differences positively."

Paul Iesa Galloway, head of iLead

"Really? We have seven hells, too," Habeeb said.

This was what Paul Iesa Galloway, the iLead program's head, hoped would happen.

"What these guys are doing is literally building an interfaith community," he said.

Right way to engage

In its first year, the program was kept small and applicants recruited from just a few houses of worship, but Galloway hopes to work with more faith leaders in future years to identify more applicants and expand the group to more traditions. Although Interfaith Ministries anticipates tweaking iLead next year, as well as iFaith, a larger partner program open to all youth without an application, the local nonprofit thinks it's finally found the right way to engage, not just speak at, kids.

Galloway, president Elliot Gershenson and a group of Houston faith leaders designed the program to give back to the city and train the next generation to comfortably act alongside people of different faiths. Business, government and religious leaders guide monthly discussions, building a lasting bond that doesn't burden the schedules of

busy high achievers.

Outside the meetings, the high school students use email and Facebook to keep in touch and plan their service project, as well as the call-to-action presentation they're preparing for Interfaith Ministries' annual Gala in April.

"Houston is the model for the rest of the nation on how to handle diversity," Galloway said. "Wherever life takes them, they'll have those experiences that make them people who are respectful of others and can leverage our differences positively."

It's not easy to move from simply tolerating someone's differences — like one must coexist with a rash — to respecting another's values.

Months into the program as students began to plan their service project, gaps appeared.

They hoped to build a community food garden at a Houston park that would feed the needy with plots maintained by different houses of worship. The practical challenges overwhelmed their vision, and not everyone could remember whether Muslims met at a temple and Jews at a mosque, or the reverse.

"I have a few questions left to ask when the right opportunity comes," said Hilario. "I want to make sure they're comfortable with it."

Keep beliefs private?

Kate Barkley, a soft-spoken Baptist, said while faith ideally should not be a secret, their generation often feels the easiest way to respect and avoid insulting someone is to keep beliefs private.

"We need to find a way to be able to express and know who we are without seeming pushy," she said.

Asha fears the generational curse of living in homogenous communities that border each other but never interact.

"You might be comfortable. I was comfortable," Asha admitted. "You need to get uncomfortable just a little bit."

They wanted to move past their generation's live-and-let-live attitude to leave a legacy, but realized the challenge is not envisioning a better world, but living now the future they hope to see.

The teens gained courage from a panel discussion Monday with Jewish Rabbi Samuel Karff, Baptist Reverend William Lawson and Catholic Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza — three of the city's original interfaith collaborators — which was moderated by Houston demographic historian Stephen Klineberg.

Live your faith

The three retired faith leaders began working together during the civil rights movement and today continue to battle injustices within jails. They called for Houstonians to live, not just study, their faith, which includes working together to provide for fundamental human needs and guarantee basic rights.

"It's not your responsibility to complete the work, but we can't abandon it," said Karff as Lily filled the borders of her program with notes.

"We do look with hope at the young people to continue our work," said Fiorenza, who confirmed the rapt Hilario.

"Then the three of us can go into our graves saying, 'It'll be all right,'" Lawson said, Habeeb leaning forward intently as everyone else chuckled.

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