



YLP Coordinator Krithika Harish (second from right) reflects with youth participants at the Closing Rituals at the FYI (Faith, Youth and Immigration) Conference

IMMIGRANT YOUTH FIND STRENGTH IN SOLIDARITY



Youth at the FYI Conference opening ceremony

Caught between two nations – and the shifting policies and attitudes of each – young immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area had the opportunity to share their experiences at the FYI (Faith, Youth & Immigration) Conference held on October 13, co-sponsored by URI.

The event at Oakland’s Mills College featured a panel of six young people, including Eritrean refugee Medhanie Taye; Wardah Chowdhry, who has faced prejudice and scorn as the only girl at her high school to wear a Muslim headscarf; and Yvette Jimenez, who at age 18 saw her life turned upside down when immigration agents detained both of her parents and deported her father.

“The conference showed that there is a lot of solidarity among first and second generation immigrants,” said URI Associate Executive Director Debra Bernstein. “The interfaith movement is one of the most vital advocates for a just immigration policy.”

The conference also explored ways in which spirituality can serve as an instrument of social change. In a keynote address, Rev. Deborah Lee, director of the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights, discussed the relationship between faith and the rights of young newcomers.

“Seeing immigration through the lens of faith can bring about understanding, respect for each of our migration stories and humane treatment and dignity for all,” Rev. Lee said.

URI has continued to draw attention to the issue of global migration – and the physical and spiritual needs of immigrants and their host communities – through its “Global Me” social action campaign.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work at URI is supervising the staff of the Young Leaders Program (YLP), an impressive and growing cadre of exceptional young people committed to interfaith action. They benefit from being mentored by URI's experienced members and from having authentic opportunities to lead their own Cooperation Circles, as well as service and community change projects.

The talent and energy of URI's young leaders gives me great hope for a future in which human rights are secure, the environment is healthy and sustainable, and civil society brings a rich diversity of voices to the tables of influence. The impact of Sarah Talcott Blair, who inaugurated URI's work with young people and served as YLP Director for three years, continues to reverberate through URI's youth network. This month we are working with Sarah once again to update and expand a vital URI toolkit called *Responses to Hostilities Against Faith Communities*.

Sarah mentored Matthew Youde, who is profiled

in this issue of InterAction. He joined the YLP staff in 2010 and now coordinates URI's global youth leadership development programs. Last year, we also added a new coordinator, Krithika Harish, to build intercultural literacy programming for high school students in the San Francisco Bay Area. Hannington Wako is our newest YLP staff member who is already growing youth-led Cooperation Circles in Africa.

And it's worth noting that Kiran Bali, URI's current (and youngest) Global Council Chair, is one of our long-time youth trainers. She has been honored by Queen Elizabeth II for her interfaith work in England.

These young leaders are making a real difference. The extraordinary mentoring that URI members provide these emergent leaders is such a dynamic part of building this next generation of compassionate and inclusive interfaith innovators. I hope you will be as inspired as me by the profiles in this issue. For URI, investing in youth is investing in our future.



Debra with young interfaith leaders from CIEUX International in France who are bridging secular and religious communities to improve neighborhood relations.

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FOUR YOUNG LEADERS TO FOLLOW

IRFAN ALI: MOTIVATING THOUSANDS IN PAKISTAN



“If we do not stand by each other, if we do not support each faith at a time of emergency or crisis, there is no sense of that peace or interfaith work.”

In his thirteen years as an interfaith activist and peace worker, Irfan Ali has met, taught and inspired more than 3,000 young people throughout Pakistan.

To do so, Irfan has traveled from the cities of Islamabad and Lahore to the isolated villages of western Pakistan. He has also maintained his commitment to interfaith, intercultural and international work at a time of increasing tension between Pakistan and the world outside its borders.

“These are the things that peace demands,” said Irfan, 35, who leads the Quetta-based Roots Cooperation Circle. “If we do not stand by each other, if we do not support each faith at a time of emergency or crisis, there is no sense of that peace or interfaith work.”

In October, Irfan traveled to Peshawar, a city on the Khyber Pass not far from the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. There, he took part in what has become a familiar routine: meeting with officials at the university to promote the creation of Cooperation Circles, providing leadership training and education for local young people.

“Irfan sees himself as a planter of seeds, finding good leaders who can help lead groups when he leaves, and whom Irfan can remain in good contact with,” said URI Director of Regional Development Sally Mahe. “This is extraordinary and courageous work in the name of ending religiously-motivated violence.”

MATTHEW YOUDE: EMPOWERING YOUTH AROUND THE WORLD

Matthew Youde understands the power of interfaith social action to change a young person’s life. After all, it was at a URI Europe assembly that Matthew – then a young volunteer – met former Youth Programs Director Sarah Talcott, who convinced him to help organize the first international gathering of URI youth in Mayapur, India.

Sarah would later urge Matthew to pursue a seat on URI’s Global Council, where he would become the governing body’s youngest-ever trustee. It’s her example, Matthew says, that continues to inspire him as Coordinator of the global component of URI’s Young Leaders Program.

“Good youth workers find ways to reach out to young people and excite them,” said Matthew, 24. “They make them believe they are capable of achieving remarkable things and that their skills and talents are a gift to others.”

The core of the Young Leaders Program (YLP) remains simple, says Matthew: combine a time-tested framework of interactive workshops, dialogue, service and community organizing opportunities with content particular to the needs and interests of young people in a particular geographic area.

It’s an approach Matthew applied in April, while conducting – with the YLP’s San Francisco Bay Area Coordinator, Krithika Harish – a leadership retreat in Buenos Aires for members of Argentina’s Bridge Builders program.

“Having gathered a really diverse group of young men and women, Matthew found ways to communicate that went further than language,” said Maria Eugenia Crespo de Mafia, URI’s CC Global Support Coordinator and a Bridge Builders leader.



“Good youth workers find ways to reach out to young people and excite them.”

FOUR YOUNG LEADERS TO FOLLOW



TA'KAIYA BLANEY: SPEAKING FOR THE EARTH

Songwriter and activist Ta'Kaiya Blaney has performed on three continents, including a URI-sponsored event at the recent United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Her work on behalf of the environment has won her international renown, and the video for her most popular song, "Shallow Waters," has more than 113,500 views on YouTube.

All of this would be impressive even if Ta'Kaiya were not 11 years old.

Ta'Kaiya, a member of the Protecting and Restoring the Sacred Cooperation Circle in Canada, has been singing since she was four years old, playing the violin since she was three and appearing in films since the age of six. Alarmed by proposals for the Northern Gateway oil pipeline – which would threaten salmon habitat and cross

First Nations land without the consent of those groups – Ta'Kaiya, a member of the Sliammon Nation, dedicated herself to opposing the project.

"One day, this world will be handed down to my generation – and what will they give us?" Ta'Kaiya asked. "A land filled with pipelines; an empty ocean that was once filled with fish and otters? I think children and youth need to be speaking out for our future."

Ta'Kaiya had hoped to attend the Rio+20 Conference as a member of the Indigenous Environmental Network. When that group failed to secure the documentation needed to attend, URI Global Council Trustee Rebecca Tobias and Monica Willard, URI's representative to the United Nations, stepped in to make Ta'Kaiya's participation possible.



"I think children and youth need to be speaking out for our future."

HANNINGTON WAKO: ENGAGING AFRICA'S FUTURE LEADERS



"Youth are the future of this continent."

By the time he became URI's Young Leaders Program Associate for Africa in July, Hannington Wako had already spent ten years training, leading and organizing young people in Africa's Great Lakes Region as a URI volunteer. During that time, URI's Africa Youth Network worked with more than 5,000 young people.

"The highest population of people aged 15 to 30 is here in Africa," said Hannington, 30. "So our programs address the issues that are important to them, such as employment, as well as malaria and other diseases."

After jobs and health care, the most important goal for a majority of Africa's youth is an opportunity to participate in decision-making processes, the United Nations reported in 2010. That opportunity to exercise real leadership in programs that

make a difference for their communities is one reason so many young Africans have joined URI Cooperation Circles, according to Hannington.

"The possibilities are open, with so many opportunities to meet other young people and other networks," Hannington said.

As a member of the Latter Glory of Religions in Busoga Cooperation Circle, Hannington has devoted himself to a number of the group's causes, donating his own money to a program that allowed the 150 members of the Bufwla URI Women's Group to sow, raise and harvest crops in northern Uganda. Yet his primary interest remains Africa's young people.

"Youth," said Hannington, "are the future of this continent."

TAKING ACTION AROUND THE WORLD

IN AFRICA, CC'S EFFORTS HELP TURN THE TIDE AGAINST AIDS

In Malawi, where more than half the population is 25 years old or younger, members of the Blantyre Cooperation Circle have turned to the airwaves, athletic fields and other activities to help the nation's young people overcome a host of challenges.

Those challenges include a high rate of unemployment and the continued threat of HIV/AIDS, responsible across the continent for one out of every four deaths among young boys and one out of every two deaths among young girls, according to the United Nations.

In response, the Blantyre CC has launched Peace Clubs in communities and secondary schools, providing young people with information about the causes and impacts of the disease. Members have also addressed the issue on a pair of popular radio programs for young people.

More than one thousand young people have taken part in the community debates, training sessions, interfaith prayer services, workshops, sports and radio programs sponsored by the Cooperation Circle. Thanks in part to those programs, the number of early marriages in Malawi – a risk factor for AIDS – has begun to decline, more young people are attending school and crime rates are dropping, said Pastor Alex Business Banda, chair of the Blantyre CC.

Those kind of activities “increase the youth participation in many areas such as politics, religion and development, both at the community and the national level,” the Rev. Alex said.



On Sept. 21, the Blantyre Cooperation Circle celebrated the International Day of Peace with youth activities that included poetry recitals, a dancing competition and a soccer match between two local secondary schools.

YOUTH AMBASSADORS PROGRAM TEACHES LEADERSHIP

On Oct. 16, Kathryn Hale and Fathima Begum of the United Kingdom and Vedrana Damjanovic and Lejla Hasandedic of Bosnia became URI's newest Youth Ambassadors.

The four young women will receive training, support and initial funding from URI's Young Leaders Program. They will also receive the help of a mentor in completing a service project, one that will have an impact in both their local communities and the broader geographic region.

In the past, those service projects have included the creation of a conflict resolution training and research center in Beirut, an interfaith blood drive for AIDS patients in Kenya and an international photography competition in Amman, Jordan, on the subject of peace.

The program began in 2010 as a way for URI to provide the young participants in its leadership training programs with the long-term guidance and support they needed to become the next generation of interfaith leaders.

“Wherever I am, when I am contacted by members of a Cooperation Circle, I feel I am being approached by family members,” said former Youth Ambassador Rosen Dimov, 25. “The Youth Ambassadors Program gave me the necessary skills to further my inter-religious efforts.”

The new Youth Ambassadors from Europe will soon be joined by four more Ambassadors from the Great Lakes Region of Africa who “are ready to learn and develop their abilities, are able to work on their own initiative, as well as with others, and are willing to embody a spirit of volunteerism,” said Young Leaders Program Coordinator Matthew Youde.

More information about the Youth Ambassadors Program, including program rules and application forms, is available online at http://www.uri.org/action_areas/youth/201213_youth_ambassadors_program.



Fathima
Begum



Lejla
Hasandedic



Vedrana
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**We welcome our
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AUGUST 2012

African Centre For Peace Building
(AFCOBP) - Ghana, Africa

African Youth Peace Initiatives - Uganda,
Africa

Muslim Taraqqyati Wa Falahi Adara - India,
Asia

Understanding Cultural and Religious
Values - Sri Lanka, Asia

Interfaith Council for Peace in Mindanao -
Philippines, SEA-Pac

SEPTEMBER 2012

National Unity and Reconciliation
Commission of Rwanda - Rwanda, Africa

Conflict Resolution by Youth (CRY) -
Uganda, Africa

Sarwa Dharmatha Kendra Kandy CC - Sri
Lanka, Asia

Compassionate Action Network
International (CAN International) - USA,
North America

TAMERA and GRACE - Movement for a
Free Earth - Multi-Region

OCTOBER 2012

Bokaro Peace Circle - India, Asia

Pialsole Aboriginal Development Society -
India, Asia

Vidyasagar Academy - India, Asia

Arizona Interfaith Movement - USA, North
America



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