

Living Dr. King's Dream

By Ari Hendin, Interfaith Center intern and student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Center.

The teenager quietly but clearly repeated after the Imam in Arabic, “*There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah*”. Tears of joy flowed as one of the women sounded the traditional ululation in celebration. The Muslim young woman chose to have the visiting teens serve as witnesses for this Muslim rite of *Shahadah*, the public declaration of faith that is one of the Five Pillars of the Islamic faith.

Witnessing this ceremony is just one of the many unexpected moments of learning and creating connections that happen in the *Walking the Walk* program of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia, which combines interfaith youth dialogue with community service and learning. Reverend Lamont Wells, the group leader, opened the day of interfaith service and dialogue for the 15 Muslim, Catholic and Protestant teens meeting at Al Aqsa Islamic Society day school in North Philadelphia on Martin Luther King Day. Setting the tone for the Day of Service, Rev. Wells quoted the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Reverend Wells then asked the teens to share what they had personally witnessed or experienced that was that first led them to join *Walking the Walk*. One girl shared that the sports rivalry between her high school and another school with a lot of Jewish students degenerated into an exchange of anti-Semitic and racial slurs. By contrast, a Christian boy said that when his cousin converted to Islam he was initially upset, but after opening himself to listening to his cousin, he

understood that his cousin found beauty and meaning in Islam, even though he himself was committed to Christianity. These teens had first-hand experience with encountering “the other,” and seeing that such encounters could lead to deepening either prejudice or understanding.

Led by Ari Hendin, an intern with the Interfaith Center and a student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the students then explored how to ask “good questions” about another faith, rather than judgmental questions. Instead of asking, “Why do you Christians feel the need to shove your religion in my face by wearing a cross?” participants learned that a genuinely curious, non-judgmental question would be something like, “What does the cross symbolize for you?” Using this as a guide, participants generated questions for their peers, and each faith group took turns answering. By addressing everything from, “Why do Jews wear hats?” to “What do Muslims think of the 9-11 attackers,” participants deepened their understanding of other faiths and each other. Asked what they learned from this process, a Protestant Christian boy remarked with a measure of awe, “I have new respect for nuns. They dedicate their whole lives to God!”

At the end of the day, participants had deepened their commitment to preventing injustices that target faiths by doing the work of listening to and learning from one another. To coin the words of another visionary of justice, Gandhi, they are truly becoming the change they want to see in the world.