Nicole Neroulias

San Mateo County Times

1st Place
2006
Cassels Award
Along the fertile hills and sweeping ocean vistas, an old blue van jostling along Pescadero's dirt roads seems out of place. But manicured homeowners and muddy migrant workers alike wave warmly to its driver, the Rev. Wendy Taylor, the Pescadero Community Church minister who runs Puente de la Costa Sur - which translates to "Bridge of the South Coast."

Under the 60-year-old's tireless guidance, the 7-year-old faith-based group has distributed 350 bicycles and countless bags of rice and beans, toiletries, phone cards and blankets to the impoverished Mexicans who work the region's 30 nurseries and ranches.

"She's helped everyone understand that community means everybody. These are people who are part of the economy of the community," said Supervisor Rich Gordon, who represents the coast.

Taylor's bridge-building mission includes taking visitors on the two-hour drive around her 450-square-mile ministry - past the torn jeans drying from window sills, the fence-post shrines to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the barracks crammed with workers and their families.

There are at least 1,000 Mexican workers in the Pescadero-La Honda area, ranging in age from 14 to 60, she estimates. It costs $2,500 to hire a "coyote" to help them across the border, so most arrive with little more than the clothes on their backs.

After welcoming them with "goodie bags," Taylor encourages them to attend Thursday and Sunday gatherings at "La Sala," Puente's Pescadero Road office. "We have communion with popcorn, tortillas, cookies and Gatorade," she said. "This is a real street church."

Part pastor, part social worker, Taylor also finds herself serving as a head-hunter and Realtor, as increasing numbers of workers are displaced each year due to farms shutting down.

"We've lost half our roses, half our 'chokes, half our sprouts," she said, shaking her head. "Whenever we can, we work with the owners to make other arrangements."

In addition to bikes, beans and blankets, Puente dispenses pamphlets for Alcoholicos Anonimos and free condoms - reminders that farm workers must stay healthy to earn money for their families back home.

"A guy came in with anemia so bad he was dizzy and falling all over himself. I bought him some spinach and raisins and gave him some of my old vitamin B pills," Taylor said. "But he had to keep working."

Carlos Gonzalez, 43, who shares a trailer with four other men, stopped by La Sala to make a medical clinic appointment.

"We come here to look for help and to communicate with Americans," he said.
"We don't have phones, so we come here."
At first, Gonzalez said, workers insist Taylor is a nun - although the first they've ever met with a leather cross, rainbow-trimmed blouse and beaded Native American and Buddhist bracelets.
"Now I know you are a priest," Gonzalez said, mounting his blue donated bicycle after confirming his appointment.
Although fluent in Spanish and an experienced volunteer on service teams to Mexico, Peru, Nicaragua and El Salvador, Taylor said it took divine intervention to open her eyes to the needs of the coastside immigrant community.
While lunching at Duarte's Restaurant in Pescadero one day, she said, a woman mentioned that the local school desperately needed bilingual teachers.
A pastor at the Congregational Church of Belmont at the time, Taylor paid scant attention until her unusual drive home.
"I saw a triple rainbow, two coyotes that stayed right by the highway and baby otters," she said. "I went back a week later and took the job."
She also joined Pescadero Community Church and formed Puente to focus on the migrant community. The group recently became an independent nonprofit organization, but church members still contribute to the $180,000 annual budget - which includes Taylor's salary and two part-time employees.
When she's not stopping by pastures or staffing La Sala, Taylor's clients find her at home down the street, which she shares with her partner, Ellen Sweetin.
"It's like being a country doc, living in a fishbowl," she said. "It takes two hours to walk from my house to the post office and back because I run into 20 people."
Taylor plans to retire as Puente's executive director next year and move to San Mateo, closer to Sweetin's job as a County Health Department manager. But she knows it will be tough to scale back her time with the workers and to find a replacement as committed to her projects.
Above all, the bicycle donation program must continue, she said. Without transportation, the workers cannot look for better housing and jobs, nor easily seek assistance from Puente.
But even the poorest workers have standards, she said.
"They hate the pink ones. Pink and purple are not their favorites," Taylor said, chuckling. "We try to stick with black and blue."
For more information, call Puente de la Costa Sur at (866) 892-8236.
September 22, 2005
Standing with hands folded and heads bowed, the audience listened reverently to the Rev. Vern Jones' prayer on May 23. "Oh Lord, our governor," intoned the retired Episcopal rector, "we especially ask you this night to guide our Redwood City mayor and council in this meeting. We pray that you will give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding that they may seek truth and justice for the people of our city."

Such three-minute invocations have kicked off Redwood City Council sessions for as long as anyone can remember - at least 25 years, according to the Rev. Dennis Logie, president of the Redwood City Clergy Association and monthly Faith page columnist.

The U.S. Congress and the California Legislature both open sessions with invocations. In 1983, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that legislative prayer is allowed on a non-sectarian basis.

But Redwood City is the only Peninsula city that still permits prayers at government meetings. Of 75,000 residents, no one has ever objected - astonishing neighboring atheists and members of the mid-Peninsula American Civil Liberties Union.

"We told them about the separation of church and state, and we think what they're doing violates it, but we have not pursued this any further," said Harry Anisgard, ACLU chapter chairman. "We would like to eliminate any reference to religion at a government function like that, but it doesn't have top priority right now."

Don Havis, a San Mateo resident and member of San Francisco Atheists, said he tried to organize opposition to the invocations, but found that even atheists in Redwood City preferred to focus on other matters.

"It annoys the bejesus out of me," he said. "If I were a Redwood City resident, I would be at every single meeting protesting, but apparently, it doesn't offend too many other people."

In the four years since the ACLU's last campaign against the invocations - which fizzled out after the "wave of religious fervor" prompted by 9/11 - Logie said he has guarded against future protests by keeping his remarks as non-sectarian as possible, and advising others to do the same. On Monday night, he prayed "to the creator of summer" and "the God of the seasons" to guide the council.

"The New Testament says we are to pray for people in positions of government authority ... but, you can pray a Jesus prayer that is a little pushy and inappropriate for a public meeting," he explained.

The majority of the six-member City Council is Catholic, including Mayor Jeff Ira, a Redwood City native elected in 1997. According to Ira, the council has no problem with the invocations from a range of faith leaders, so long as they are
"as generic as possible."
Logie, an evangelical Protestant pastor, delivers most of the prayers himself, although he encourages local rabbis, priests and other clergy to volunteer for the monthly rotation. He believes the invocations help the City Council in two ways: reminding council members of their responsibility as public servants, and setting a respectful tone for residents in attendance.
As long as the invocations do more good than harm, there's no reason to stop the long-standing tradition, Ira said. "The way I look at it, if someone wants to pray for me, I'll take all the prayers I can get," he said, chuckling.
June 23, 2005
Muslim community opens doors
By Nicole Neroulias, Staff Writer, San Mateo County Times
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Like a flock of tropical birds, the bowed heads glittered red, purple, turquoise and gold. Only upon closer inspection did the scarves reveal the wearers' Muslim devotion - or the outsiders' respect for the Ramadan observance.

The Jewish and Christian visitors to the Muslim Community Association of the Peninsula's Yaseen Foundation open house Saturday let their head coverings slip while intently following the speakers and prayers at the Belmont event. Ramadan, the holy Islamic month that requires followers to fast from dawn to dusk, began Oct. 5 and will end with the sighting of the new moon in November. The Yaseen Foundation's open house was one of five sponsored by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, inviting interfaith groups and community members into Bay Area mosques last weekend.

"Interfaith is important these days, especially for Muslims, because the news isn't always so good about Muslims," said Mounzer Arslan, Yaseen Foundation vice president, known as "Monty" among non-Muslims. "It gives a wrong name to all of us."

About 50 people attended the Belmont open house, including supportive clergy from Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, San Bruno's Church of the Nazarene and San Mateo's Temple Beth El. A handful of visitors, including San Mateo retired dentist Jack Prost, came to satisfy their curiosity about Islam.

"We just finished celebrating Yom Kippur and we had a notice in our synagogue that this was going on all over the Bay Area," Prost said, eyeing the paper plates of plump dates awaiting the sunset break-fast portion of the event. The event opened and closed with two of the five daily Muslim prayers. As the fascinated guests watched, men lined up in front and women in back, both facing east towards Mecca throughout the devotions.

Between speakers, the audience applauded 9-year-old Sarah Nofal's rousing song about the Prophet Muhammad's revelation, set to the tune of "Oh Susannah." Too young for the veil, the Belmont girl stood out in a bright red coat with a leopard-pattern trim.

The role of women in Islam came up several times during the question-and-answer session, with the speakers defending their religion's emphasis on modesty - a view that is supposed to apply to both sexes, explained Imam Zaid Shakir, of Berkeley.

"If you see a Muslim man with tight jeans on, you should tell him, 'Go back to your religious teacher,'" he told the audience.

Samina Sundas, chair of the Newark-based American Muslim Voice, offered that she had been raised in Pakistan "like a princess," and agreed with Shakir that Westerners overlook positive examples of women's rights in the Muslim world - including female presidents elected in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey - in favor of stereotypes.
Authoritarian governments, not Islamic tenets, are to blame for oppression of women in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, they agreed. In Afghanistan, the Taliban had also oppressed men - forcing them to grow beards and fight in their wars - but Americans only know about the women, Shakir added. The Rev. Catherine Costas, deacon at Good Shepherd Church, found herself nodding along with the speeches.

"The fundamentalism that we see in the media is not the true Islam, just like the fundamentalism of Christianity is not the true Christianity," she said.

After sunset, the guests and hosts broke the daily fast over a hearty Middle Eastern meal of split-pea soup, lentils, humus and falafel. By breaking pita together, Yaseen Foundation members said, the groups had a more informal opportunity to forge interfaith bonds.

These bonds must be strengthened so that non-Muslims will support Muslims in their times of need, ranging from post-9/11 discrimination to the South Asian earthquake victims, Sundas said. The relationship works both ways; Muslims around the world have donated millions of dollars to Hurricane Katrina victims, she noted.

"If one of us gets hurt, we should all hurt, just like a body," she said.

October 20, 2005
MENLO PARK - When Shawn Carey graduates from St. Patrick's Seminary, his mentors predict a long line of lapsed Catholics eager to confess to the new priest. It's not just the tall 33-year-old's understanding smile or thoughtful brown eyes. It's the hearing aids snaking out of the profoundly deaf seminarian's ears. "In Boston, a lot of parishioners said they wanted to come to me for confession because 'You won't be able to hear me, I'll feel really safe,'" he signed through an interpreter, punctuated by his deep, throaty chuckle. "My priest said, 'I think your confession schedule will be really busy!'"

Sponsored by the Archdiocese of Boston, the former investment analyst is one of three deaf students at St. Patrick's - the only North American seminary with a dedicated program for the hearing-impaired. "There are so few priests, there's really a need for this," said the Rev. Vincent Buey, dean of students. "This is an adventure for us."

Meeting a need

The National Catholic Office for the Deaf estimates 6.7 million deaf and partially deaf Catholics in America, but just four born-deaf priests and fewer than seven seminarians.

In 1997, the Archdiocese of New York established a House of Studies for Deaf Seminarians, helmed by the Rev. Thomas Coughlin, who became the first born-deaf man ordained a Catholic priest in 1977. But the program was shut down in 2000.

Two years later, then-Archbishop William Levada welcomed Coughlin to the San Francisco Diocese and seminarians Ghislain Cheret Bazikila, Matthew Hysell and Paul Zipimenya to St. Patrick's, followed by Carey in 2003. Hysell left for undisclosed reasons, and Bazikila is on a one-year pastoral leave, bringing the current count to two deaf students out of 79 in the three- to six-year graduate educational institution. More than half the students come from other countries, so services include elements of Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese - all interpreted by Neva Turoff, the seminary's new coordinator of deaf services.

At Mass, Turoff signs translations or finger-spells the foreign words. Carey and Zipimenya sign the responses voiced by their classmates, palms pressed together to indicate "Amen." Halfway through the service, Turoff moves from the aisle to the altar, so the seminarians always "face the action," she explained. "It's very important that they feel as connected to the service as possible," she said.

Turoff's days begin with 7:30 a.m. prayers and last seven to 14 hours, depending on the seminary schedule, the availability of part-time interpreters and computerized captioning programs.
After Friday morning Mass, she ate breakfast nearby while Carey and Ziriminya dined with classmates, lip-reading, signing and speaking about upcoming exams. "If they have an accent, it can be hard for me to lip-read them," Carey later signed, although Ziriminya, who is from Uganda and did not completely lose his hearing until he was 14, said he hadn't had any trouble.

Turoff attended theology class with Carey and finished the morning translating student presentations on Catholic saints for Ziriminya. The latter had set up a laptop microphone on the lectern, but the 5-second captioning delay made it more convenient to watch an interpreter. A few classmates also used some signs, learned from Carey in the class he teaches twice a week.

In his class, Carey whispers vocabulary words as he reads a dozen lips and adjusts their fingers for trickier signs like "orange," an O-shaped squeezing motion over the nose. While he writes on the blackboard, the students can get his attention by thumping on the table, sending vibrations across the room. "Last year, some of the students surprised me by signing the Mass," he signed, proudly. "It was a great surprise."

As deaf prospective priests, they are pioneers for the Catholic Church, but at St. Patrick's, Carey and Ziriminya see themselves as representing just another of the many diverse cultures found in the student body.

They eat, pray and study with their classmates, and are sent out to both deaf and hearing congregations on weekends and vacations. On designated "silent days," they refrain from signing, just as their hearing classmates refrain from speaking.

"I don't think the experience is any different from being a seminarian who is not deaf. Well, maybe the faculty tend to be very sensitive to the deaf seminarians, maybe you get more attention," Ziriminya said.

Both Ziriminya, who will graduate in 2008, and Carey, who will return to Boston in four years, want to be ordained to help the Catholic Church become more accessible to deaf worshipers, both locally and worldwide.

But, having secured a seminary placement, a full-time interpreter and growing understanding and acceptance in the faith community, they still encounter a range of smaller obstacles - down to their sign language, which varies by region as well as by country. Religious terms like "begotten" and "ascension" have several possible signs; a few others, such as "chancery" - a diocese or archdiocese headquarters - don't have any signs yet and must be spelled out by Turoff and the seminarians every time.

"As we get more deaf priests, perhaps there will be a sign for that, as more people have to say, 'Where is the chancery?'" Carey signed, smiling.

November 11, 2005
Christmas, Hanukkah or Chrismukkah?
By Nicole Neroulis, Staff Writer, San Mateo County Times
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Twas the night before Chrismukkah, and all were appeased. They hung stockings 'neath menorahs, and dreidels from trees.
Well, not quite. Although both Christmas and the first night of Hanukkah fall on Dec. 25 this year - the first time in three decades - interfaith experts say most Jewish-Christian couples resolve their "December Dilemma" by choosing one faith or keeping traditions separate, rather than shopping for reindeer menorahs and Star of David ornaments.
"It's important to separate the holidays so people can really enjoy the significance of both," said Helena McMahon, manager of Interfaith Connection at the Jewish Community Center in San Francisco. "Each has its own unique, wonderful story."
Both holidays include gift-giving and decorative lights but have very different levels of significance in their respective calendars. For Christians, the birthday of Jesus, the son of God, which is observed Dec. 25, is a major event. The eight-night festival of Hanukkah, marking the rededication of the Temple after the Maccabees overthrew the ancient Greeks, is a minor Jewish holiday, only elevated in America as an alternative to Christmas.
The "Chrismukkah" concept took off two years ago, popularized by the Fox teen soap opera "The O.C.," in which a character created the blended holiday for his Protestant-Jewish family. But while the name and commercialization are new - and offensive to many believers on either side - interfaith families have always tried to find ways to share different traditions. The greater challenge this year is that both fall on the same day.
"It brings the issue right to the forefront," McMahon said. "You have to decide: Do you combine the holidays or just celebrate one? Does one holiday get short shrift?"
McMahon, who is Jewish, and her husband, who is Catholic, are raising their daughters Jewish but also decorate a Christmas tree.
"It signifies the warmth of the holiday and the family togetherness." she said.
Other couples at the Jewish Community Center's "December Dilemma" workshop earlier this month shared similar traditional separations - plans to spend Christmas morning opening presents under the tree, then light the menorah at sunset.
Julie Gainsley, a Jewish woman from Foster City, has spent three Christmases with her Protestant boyfriend, Bill Urban of Portola Valley. She enjoys the holiday services at Stanford's Memorial Church but admitted to feeling guilty about how her family across the country would feel about such practices.
This year, she made a glittering Star of David for the top of Urban's tree but said, "Anyone who is really Jewish would never do that."
In response, Urban offered that they "blend" traditions based on practicality, rather than beliefs.
"We take the part that's accessible to us, that we can enjoy," he said. "What we appreciate most of those different faiths is the celebration of life and the opportunity they give us to see our family and friends.
"It's the human elements, not so much the artifacts like the Christmas tree versus something else."
Menlo Park's Daniel Gehant, a Catholic, and Kimberly Haimsohn, a Jew, who are
engaged, resolve their family dilemma by alternating holiday seasons. Having spent last year with her parents, they are flying to Chicago this year for his family's Christmas reunion. While they are there, however, the couple will find a quiet place to light the menorah, Gehant added.

"We're kind of copping out," he said, laughing. "It's a big mixed-up mess of traditions, but there's no true merging of anything. If you blend all your traditions, what are your beliefs?"

When the time comes to have children, he said they probably would choose one religion but would continue to have both a Christmas tree and a menorah in their home. Rabbi Karen Citrin, of San Mateo's Temple Beth El, which has a large percentage of interfaith families, strongly advises them against celebrating Chrismukkah. The Faith columnist sympathizes with their sensitive circumstances and has nothing against participating in other traditions with extended families, but in their own home, children should have just one holiday, she said.

"I think it's confusing to celebrate both, and it's offensive to combine them into one," she said. "It really doesn't do either of them justice to combine them."

For interfaith couples reluctant to make that choice, the best years are the ones when Hanukkah falls in late November or early December - creating an easy distinction between the Jewish and Christian holiday seasons.

"When they're separate, there's more holiday spirit, and more recognition for the Jewish people's holidays when they come first," Gainsley said.

December 22, 2005