

Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

Radio Salaam – Shalom
www.salaamshalom.org.uk

"This project has opened up a whole new world for me. My perception of Jewish people has totally changed. It was very negative. One's thoughts are made up from the news, what you hear from the media. I had never met anyone Jewish before and I had an image in my mind of what a Jewish person's views would be and how they would react towards me as a Muslim and those are quite heavy burdens. Once I started coming to the meetings and interacting, I stopped seeing them as Jewish people. They were just 'people.'" (Javed, speaking on Radio 4 22nd August 2007)

"I was really attracted to explore 'the other' and getting to know people who are different and similar to me. I didn't have any understanding of how similar Jews and Muslims are – food, rituals after death, Prophets, common stories. Since we got to know each other, we can tackle more difficult sensitive subjects – Israel/Palestine, Nazi Germany, 7/7, belief in god. Because I know the questions are not coming out of hatred, maybe just misunderstandings or media attitudes, I feel safer and able to thrash them out. It will all come, slowly." (Brendi)

Javed and Brendi were two of the broadcasters on Radio Salaam-Shalom, Bristol's Muslim-Jewish internet based radio station. In 2005 friends Farouk and Adnam noticed that Jews and Muslims had the same Holy Days – Rosh Hashanah and Ramadan. They organised open meetings in Muslim and Jewish centres facilitated by two rabbis, an imam and members of the Jewish and Muslim communities of Bristol and realised how much common ground they had. The debates went on for hours and a group decided to take the talking further and to a wider audience. Radio Salaam-Shalom was launched in February 2007 with a grant from the UK government and European Union. They reached people in Indonesia, Iran, South Africa, USA, and Germany.

The project aimed to encourage Jews and Muslims to talk to each other. And 'show the young that there's nothing to stop us talking.' The radio station focused on what they refer to as the "moderate majority." As Farooq Saddique of the Bristol Muslim Cultural Society says, 'the radio station is interested in showing Jews and Muslims as human beings, not as representatives of a conflict in the Middle East.' He believes that conflict has defined Jewish and Muslim relationships for too long.

Georgia and Shabana are young women who broadcast together on the station. They front the *Shabz'n'G Show* and have complete editorial control. They discuss whichever topics and views they want to air – religion, politics, literature, guests, phone-ins, music, Bollywood, Shakira, Arabic and Jewish music. 'It's exciting and terrifying, at first there were lots of glitches' says Georgia. 'If we know it we know it but most of all, we learn as we go along. 'She got involved after feeling shock from her visit to Israel, during the 2006 war in Lebanon and was drawn to the idea of a project which was about dialogue and peace. 'It has opened my eyes and mind. I came to feel a deeper connection, being religious cousins we share many commonalities; the way some Jews

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and Muslims prepare food, cover their hair and most importantly our virtues. The cultural mix is actually very friendly, and there is much communal support before and after our shows. We have created a new community of our own.'

For Shabana the impact of the radio station has been equally profound:

'I had always been interested in the media, I love meeting new people and it's had a great impact on my life. It is so positive and everyone – Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Sikhs seems pleased. We cannot make progress without dialogue and Georgia and I are close friends now. I can ask her anything, we trust each other. I'm really curious. If someone says something about Islam, I learn and challenge my own religion, usually when talking about relationships, marriage, politics, and sex outside marriage or homosexuality.

You can't find your identity unless you embrace your own history and doing this research for the radio has made me proud to be a Muslim and Asian. I've discovered all these amazing scientists. At school we learned about the Empire and how oppressed 'we' were [my family is from Kashmir originally]. According to these books, my people were ruled by a 'superior' race. I never came across Muslims – only fundamentalists and extremists. It made me embarrassed about who I was, it wasn't me. It was an identity forced on me by the media. What's lovely about Radio Salaam-Shalom is it helped me find who I am.

I used to have such a stereotype of Jews and saw all Jewish history as negative. Jews fleeing from persecution, docile, and passive, negative awful stereotypes. But now I've had a chance to hear the real story, through their history, literature and politics. I knew nothing about Israel. The Middle East is so complex. Now I engage more with it and try to understand it. I'm teaching myself and talking to Jewish people with alternative views. They are so much like us! My best friend is Christian but Judaism and Islam are identical. I don't even see them as separate religions now. We are a part of the same community."

Not everyone in Bristol is as enthusiastic. Javed was told he shouldn't be involved in Radio Salaam-Shalom, "A surprising person asked me why I was talking to 'the enemy'...But he's ignorant, ill-informed. People like him don't want to meet the 'other side' and hear what they have to say. They just want to live in their own world. So I ignored him."

'Hopefully by what we do, engaging as humans on a human level, we make the world a better place. It's an incredible experience, we've built a bridging wall and have created pure hope.' (Farad)

'The biggest danger of things not happening is people saying, 'It can't happen.' Radio Salaam-Shalom is an example of when you sit down and say it can, it does.' (Kyle Hannan, station manager)

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Discussion:

Radio Salaam-Shalom sees civil dialogue as a positive form of participation and a bridge to peace, locally and perhaps internationally. How can a radio station forge civic space? How can it contribute to peace building?

In the reading Javed says, "A surprising person asked me why I was talking to 'the enemy' ...But he's ignorant, ill-informed. People like him don't want to meet the 'other side' and hear what they have to say. They just want to live in their own world. So I ignored him."

Sometimes it's not so easy to ignore people and sometimes the challenges you face are considerably more threatening than an uninformed comment. Consider your own community for a moment and the groups in your community who are often in conflict or are represented as being in conflict. What challenges do you think you would face by bringing these groups together for a common project? What opportunities do you foresee?

One of the speakers from the Bristol Muslim Cultural Society, Farooq Saddique, compares the radio station's emergence to the falling of the Berlin Wall. To him and his colleagues it is a momentous event despite all of the naysaying. It is an example of "breaking barriers."

The film *Not in Our Town* tells the story of how people came together as a community in Billings, Montana, USA, in response to hate crimes. The film shows how individuals had already created networks and relationships. They had begun to practice acting *civilly* so that when they *had* to respond, they were prepared to work together and to take risks as a community. Reflect on Radio Salaam-Shalom as an example of prevention.