



The Boniuk Center

for the Study and Advancement
of Religious Tolerance
at Rice University

Review of 2008/2009 Boniuk Center Work

The Boniuk Center for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance seeks to understand and promote conditions conducive to sustainable, peaceful coexistence among people of different religions around the world. Our mission is advanced when individuals learn about other religions, engage in dialogue with people of other faiths and cultivate their respect, compassion and understanding for others. The Boniuk Center provided many learning opportunities during the past year. Responses from participants demonstrate the Center's impact on advancing the culture of tolerance.

Over 3000 Houstonians joined us at the Miller Outdoor Theatre and learned about the story of the Holocaust through the production of *The Gold*, a musical. *The Gold* told the story of a German Jew and amateur boxer and took the audience on his journey of confronting the question "*What is the gold in life?*" through the Holocaust, the founding of the State of Israel and the 1972 Munich Olympics.

"...This brilliant musical was worth a thousand lectures. ... I have been demoralized by ethnic intolerance/defamation at work. Despite much counsel from others, I often feel on the brink of despair. "The Gold" gave me more insight and determination than the wisest counselors could ever provide" – audience member

The Boniuk Center partnered with Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston to produce The Greater Houston Amazing Faiths Project, which brings together people of all faiths and no faith for fellowship, learning and discussion. Over 2000 individuals gathered to participate in the cornerstone event, the Dinner Dialogue. Groups of twelve met in private homes to share a meal and engage in a guided conversation about the role of faith and spirituality in their lives. This partnership also produced the first Greater Houston "youth" dialogue, which engaged middle and high school students in learning and discussion.

"How many times do we get in a situation where people from all these different religions can really talk? Usually when people of different faiths have a 'dialogue,' it's with guns blazing." – Dinner Dialogues participant

The Greater Houston Amazing Faiths Project deepened the interfaith learning and discussion with hundreds of Houstonians who attended the World Religions Lecture Series to learn about Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Scientology, Daoism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Shintoism, and Baha'ism in an environment that was faith-neutral. The Boniuk Center's graduate fellows, Andrea Jain and Heba Kahn, both advanced Ph.D. students in the religious studies department at Rice University, served as lecturers, along with Boniuk Center's Executive Director, Dr. Jill Carroll. Dr. Moussa Khedimellah, the Center's Fulbright Scholar and co-founder of the Muslim Brotherhood against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, engaged the broader Houston community with a lecture about the landscape of Islam in European countries.

The Boniuk Center independently took the Amazing Faiths Project to the national and international level, reproducing the Dinner Dialogue in nine other U.S. cities and creating a website that makes available the entire program's educational materials and instructional videos world-wide.



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The Center continued to host speakers whose work helps others build bridges for tolerance. Speakers addressed the topic of free speech in the university environment, including Prof. Robert O'Neil from the University of Virginia and Prof. Alexander Tsesis from Loyola School of Law.

"The speakers provided a spectrum of perspectives on the topic of free speech and their comments caused me to question where the line should be drawn...is free speech protected even when the rhetoric crosses over to propaganda or hate speech?" –audience member

Opportunities for learning are also provided for those who prefer an independent process of discovery. Five thousand live listeners tuned into "Peaceful Coexistence," the Center's bi-monthly radio show, hosted on Houston's Pacifica station KPFT 90.1 FM. These shows are available as podcasts on the Boniuk Center website, including the much acclaimed show on American's freedom of religious expression emphasized by President Obama in his June 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt.

Worldwide, 7000 people joined the effort to express their personal support of religious tolerance by requesting and wearing the Boniuk Center lapel pin. Designed by Dr. Milton Boniuk himself, it contains symbols from seven of the world's major religions and the words "Tolerance," "Respect" and "Compassion."

Over 20,000 individuals have joined our efforts to create religious tolerance and foster the conditions necessary for sustainable peace. Changing the world is an audacious adventure. Thank you for supporting the Boniuk Center's mission through your financial contributions and engagement in our work.