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Iftar break-the-fast at Cadman Plaza Park draws 350 from many faith traditions



The organizers and speakers at the Cadman Plaza Park Iftar, from left: Peter B Gudaitis, the Rev. Dr. Chloe Breyer, Dr. Debbie Almontaser, Damanpreet Singh, Imam Samer, Jonathan Soto, Asaf Calderon, John Cheng and Iman Boukadoum. Eagle photo by Francesca N. Tate

"When There's A Will There's a Way": Groups Raised \$10,000 in Short Time

By Francesca Norsen Tate, Religion Editor
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

It was a huge picnic in the park, and it was open to the community.

Last Saturday, June 10, several hundred New Yorkers — Muslims and people of other faiths — gathered at Cadman Plaza Park's north end (near the Gaynor Memorial plaque) in Downtown Brooklyn to break — together — the daily fast that Muslims observe during Ramadan. More importantly, they gathered to show solidarity with Muslims in the wake of several anti-Islam rallies and protests, including one that took place earlier

on Saturday at Foley Square in Manhattan. New York was one of several cities selected for the June 10 protests.

By contrast, the Iftar was organized to "respond to hate with love." Organizers and sponsors included the Interfaith Center of New York, NY Disaster Interfaith Services, and the Muslim Community Network.

Debbie Almontaser, Ed.D., an educator, activist and the Muslim Community Network's president of the board of directors, told the Brooklyn Eagle, "This Ramadan Iftar was organized within less than a week. This is a response to the ACT for America rally on Foley Square. [ACT for America, according to its website, is an organization focusing on national security that defines itself as "the NRA of national security]."

Almontaser continued, "We wanted to stand by our Muslim allies and neighbors, and stand in solidarity with them, and let them know that we value them as members of our community. We value religious freedom, we value our diversity. And we refuse to allow this [hate rallies] to happen. To celebrate the month of Ramadan with our brothers and sisters who are fasting by hosting an Iftar, to break their fast here with fellow brothers and sisters of different faiths and racial backgrounds.

"These two organizations pulled together \$10,000 to make this possible," she added. "When there's a will, there's a way. We were determined to make it happen."

Peter Gudaitis, executive director of NY Disaster Interfaith Services, had a corps of volunteers to deliver and serve meals, and guarantee the safety of Iftar participants. Officers from the NYPD's 84th Precinct were also on hand.

"When we found out about these protests that were happening around the country, we didn't want to do a counter-protest. That just seems reactionary," he said.

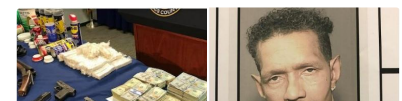
Gudaitis said that the organizations were prepared to feed 500 people. Even with the weekend disruption of the closest subway line — the A and C trains — about 350 attended throughout. About 244 people ate dinner and 250 additional meals were donated to other Iftars around the city.

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Saturday's Iftar brought together speakers and delegations from Brooklyn and beyond, representing Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh and other traditions.

They offered prayers and reflections on their faith tradition. Among the most declamatory was Bishop Dr. Raymond H. Rufen-Blanchette of the Interfaith Center's MICAHA Faith Table, who challenged the gathering. "Where is the moral outrage?" Recounting the story from Genesis, Chapter 4 in which Cain kills his brother Abel, Rufen-Blanchette asserted that "we are our brother's keeper."

Gudaitis' organization, NYDIS, founded after 9/11, provides social mental health, chaplaincy and disaster relief services.

"The reason we wanted to support this is because I feel that, over the past 15 years since 9/11, we keep having this resurgent animosity toward the American Muslim community by people who don't understand it, or choose to vilify it, or to treat Muslims as a monolith. And if NYDIS takes its role seriously as an organization that is trying to prepare NYC for future crises, we have to take seriously mitigating hate, and making sure that communities of faith are understood, and that they're given the opportunity to serve their community."

Gudaitis sought to debunk two misperceptions: that the Muslim community is new to America, and that Sharia threatens the entire nation.

"This whole anti-Sharia platform is a very odd platform," he said. "There are Christian courts in this country, there are Jewish courts in this country. All faith communities have their own ecclesiastical tribunals. None of them in this country, by Constitution, are allowed to supersede Constitutional law. They simply only make legal decisions within the community of faith about matters of faith. In the United States, it is constitutionally impossible for some extreme form of Sharia law to take a foothold.

"The fact of the matter is, Islam has been in the United States since it [N.Y.] was a Dutch colony," he pointed out, adding, "I don't think we should indulge ourselves into thinking Islam is somehow incompatible with American society and culture."

June 13, 2017 - 2:56pm

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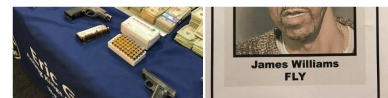
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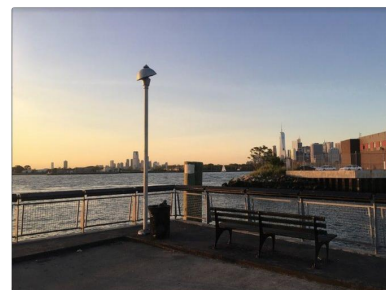
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