On Campus

Interfaith and Intercultural Programs Boosted by $500,000 Kraft Gift, CU match

Spring 2005

They poked around the buffet table cautiously at first, apparently as curious about the unfamiliar food — halal kebabs, kosher sushi, tapas — as about the day's topic. And then, once settled down to eat, the Jews, Hindus, Arab Christians, and Muslims, along with one Christian African American woman, slowly opened up about the issue they'd come to discuss: arranged marriage. And more specifically, the fact that their families expect them soon to enter one.

It was the kind of moment that Columbia Chaplain Jewelnel Davis lives for. "These students were from such different backgrounds, yet discovered that they are in very similar situations," she says. Her office helped coordinate the lunch, at Lerner Hall on a Thursday afternoon in April. "It was terrific to listen to them talk."

Columbia will organize many more events like this in the future, thanks to the establishment this spring of the Kraft Family Fund for Interfaith and Intercultural Awareness. The $1 million fund, created through a $500,000 gift from Trustee Emeritus Robert Kraft '63CC and his wife, Myra Kraft, and a matching contribution from the University, aims to facilitate understanding among Columbia community members from diverse backgrounds. In particular, it will support student-initiated programs that build upon activities organized by the cultural, ethnic, and religious student groups based in Earl Hall and administered by the University chaplain.

"This fund will provide platforms for intelligent, respectful conversations about the passionate issues that unite and divide us," says Davis, who will chair a nine-person committee of students and administrators that will allocate resources to support programs initiated by students. "Part of the goal is to help students of different backgrounds discover what they have in common. We're all part of intersecting

communities, and sometimes that means that second-generation immigrants connect with one another, as do those facing an arranged marriage."
The fund also will promote frank debates outside the classroom about "some of the most controversial, and perhaps even intractable questions of the moment," says President Lee C. Bollinger.

Imagine, for instance, a screening of a documentary film that focuses on the relationships between blacks and Asians in American inner cities, a roundtable discussion about the historic tensions between Muslims and Hindus, or a panel discussion about how medical students can become better caregivers by learning more about Washington Heights's Latino communities. In addition to sponsoring student-run programs, the fund also will support events initiated by the University, through a faculty committee established by the Offices of the President and Provost.

Alex Jung '07CC, the elected chair of the Student Governing Board and a chaplain's associate, hopes that students will plan programs promoting interfaith dialogue among Jews, Muslims, and Christians. "I also want to make sure that events address issues of gender and sexuality," says the junior anthropology major. "It's important to remember that interfaith and intercultural issues involve more than religion, race, and ethnicity, especially at a place like Columbia, where so many political and social issues are highly charged."

Guide to school abbreviations

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