**Community Partners’ Reflections:**

NewGround, Facing History and PATH (p.1, 2, and 3 respectively)

To whom it may concern:

It is with great pride that I recommend the Jewish-Muslim Day School Exchange (of Sinai Akiba Academy and New Horizon Pasadena) for The Kohelet Prize for Real-World Learning. When the exchange first began, there were many concerns and questions. Rebecca Berger was instrumental in working through the anxiety of educators and families. Rebecca and at the time NewGround’s Executive Director Rabbi Sarah Bassin, worked to anticipate and mediate roadblocks. Standing as a model example that conflict is a natural part of human relationship and that being stuck is a choice, they modeled what it means to be dedicated and work through difficult conversations—setting a solid ground work for the exchange to flourish. With time, the program was not only launched, but it has become a consistent feature of the experiences of youth at Sinai Akiba and New Horizon Pasadena.

Meeting in each other’s spaces each year for the last 5 consecutive years, hundreds of youth and educators have had the opportunity to confront their discomfort of being in the “other’s” space and eventually becoming more at ease with their different surroundings. Building relationships, learning side by side, the youth share their religious traditions with pride and broke down the barriers that exist in the world around them. Inspired by their exchanges, they shared their learning experiences in the form of creating joint art projects for their greater communities to enjoy. Students also put their new friendships into service work to apply it in a real-world setting. Just this last year, they worked in a community garden on the New Horizon campus.

Though the program was launched with some hesitation, this last May (2016) a video of the Day School Exchange was posted on Sinai Temple’s Facebook page. This video has over 22,000 views! I recently heard from a parishioner of Sinai Temple who expressed his pride in sharing this video. I was also invited to be the keynote speaker at the graduation of the 8th grade class at New Horizon last year. The exchange has opened doors at New Horizon, creating a community that is more experienced with relationships with people from the Jewish faith. Especially important because even though the program continues to be met with some opposition from different parents, it has become a significant source of pride for the institution(s) as they openly promote the program and fundraise around it. It is especially exciting to see the expressed interest from other institutions who would like to emulate this exchange.

I hope you will strongly consider the Jewish-Muslim Day School Exchange as a worthy recipient of The Kohelet Prize for Real-World Learning award.

Sincerely,

Aziza Hasan

Aziza Hasan

Executive Director

*NewGround: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change*

www.mjnewground.org

To whom it may concern:

When Ms. Berger told me she was applying for the Kohelet Prize, I was extremely excited. I’ve had the pleasure of working with Ms. Berger for the past four years in my capacity as a Program Associate with Facing History and Ourselves’ Jewish Education Program and to say I’ve learned a lot from Rebecca is an understatement.

Ms. Berger’s skill in creating rigorous, reflective and engaging learning experiences for her students is unparalleled. While I could speak to the many classes and lessons I’ve seen her conduct, I want to share a specific experience with you. Rebecca is a NewGround fellow. The NewGround Fellowship is a very selective program bringing together Jewish and Muslim participants from across Los Angeles to, as their website explains, “strengthen Muslim-Jewish relations in America and advance a shared agenda for change in Los Angeles.” What strikes me most about their description are words I would use to describe the learning environment Ms. Berger creates with her students, “a place to create, connect and transform.”

 Partnering with another NewGround fellow, Ms. Aysha Mehdi, Rebecca created the Sinai Akiba/New Horizon Exchange Program, with the goal of bringing together the Jewish students from Sinai Akiba and the Muslim students from New Horizon. Why do this? There was certainly pushback from parents at both schools and some trepidation on the part of administration. Because Rebecca knew the only way to begin the process of chipping away at stereotypes, assumptions and fear was to meet it, face to face, and create a safe space for students from both schools to question, reflect and connect. I bring this up because it’s the clear example of Ms. Berger taking concepts she explored as a NewGround Fellow and expanding them into an unbelievably powerful experience for her students and the students at New Horizon School.

 I wish there was a way to capture the transformation I’ve been honored to witness each Exchange Program. The pride the students display as they show off their schools, share their prayer experiences and connect over challenging themes like “What does it means to be a Muslim or Jewish American?” or “What does it mean to pursue justice?” is evident. Students come in expecting differences, but leave having made friends, with a deeper understanding of the shared beliefs, ideas and humanity of the students from the other school.

 None of this would be possible without the tireless work put in by both Ms. Mehdi and Ms. Berger. It’s a year-round undertaking. From creating lesson plans that find the right balance between social and social action, to endless amounts of questions, edits and discussion making to ensure the experience is something the students will take with them, far beyond the walls of the classroom, Ms. Berger doesn’t stop. I truly believe the Exchange Program she has created has made a foundational impact on the way students from both schools think about each other, their respective faiths and their role as active participants in the world around them.

 I can think of no better candidate to receive this award and know she will continue to serve as a remarkable advocate of, and testament to, the mission of your Foundation. Please don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Emily Weisberg

Program Associate, Facing History and Ourselves

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PATH, one of the largest homeless service providers in the State of California, is a proud partner of the Sinai Akiba and New Horizon Day School Exchange. My name is Andrea Murray, and as PATH’s Volunteer Coordinator, I’ve had the honor of working with the Exchange for several years. Students are guided through Islamic and Jewish texts regarding social justice, and then engage in a discussion around homelessness in Los Angeles. After that, they assemble hygiene kits and sacked lunches using donations that they themselves have collected. I’m happy to share that nearly all students contact me throughout the year to learn about other ways to get involved with PATH! The Exchange is truly remarkable, and rallies these students to make an impact in their community year round. PATH is very lucky to have their support.

Andrea Murray

Volunteer Coordinator at PATH