

IN THE SPIRIT

Diverse faiths find hope in SARAH

Muslim, Jewish and Christian women use beliefs and goals as a uniting force.

A personal journey through the spiritual communities of Orange County.

By **BILL CUNNINGHAM**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Religious beliefs have been used as wedges throughout history, driving various believers into hostile camps.

But religious beliefs can also be used as a foundation: a basis to gather, discuss, celebrate and learn.

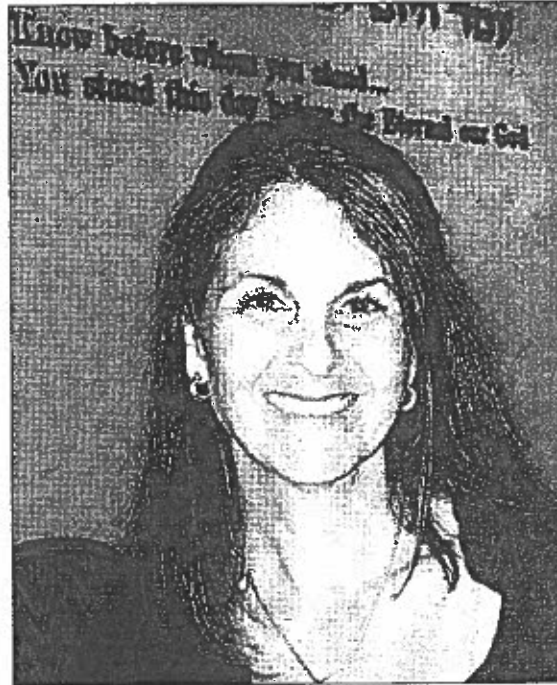
SARAH, the Spiritual and Religious Alliance for Hope, was launched in 2002 to encourage women of various spiritual backgrounds to learn about each other's cultures and beliefs.

"Historically, during times of trouble, women gather in circles to vent; we gather in circles to share our fears and concerns, but we always find solutions. And that is what SARAH is about," said Sande Hart, the group's co-founder. "It's coming together, providing a safe environment for women to dialogue. And it's about empowering ourselves and other women of the community to get involved and be part of the solution to the problems of the world."

Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Orange County Human Relations Commission brought together diverse groups to discuss tolerance and understanding. Hart, who was part of that project, was inspired by the people she met and went on to help create SARAH.

As its president, Hart organizes meetings, plans community events and encourages women whenever and where ever she finds them.

"There are more than 200 women who subscribe to SARAH's e-mail stream all around the world," said the



PHOTOS: BILL CUNNINGHAM, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

SHARED FAITH: Sande Hart, of Rancho Santa Margarita, is co-founder of SARAH, an interfaith group.



The Rev. Peggy Price

Rancho Santa Margarita mother of two children.

Talking, dining and laughing with women of different faiths "has not only has enriched my life, but it has deepened the roots of my own Jewish faith," she said. "It has made me go search for answers in my own faith."

Sahar Ali is the business administrator at the Orange County Islamic Foundation in Mission Viejo. Born in Baghdad, Ali, a mother of two, said she "always wanted a clearer image of other religions." Then, after two members of SARAH visited her mosque, she decided to attend one of their meetings.

"I love interfaith because I do truly believe in my heart that religion came to unite us, not to divide us," she said.

The Rev. Peggy Price of the Center for Spiritual Living in Seal Beach also has had a "passion for interfaith." She is the mother of four and grandmother of seven.

Saying that her religion is "Christian and more," Price expressed concern about people who close themselves off from anyone who is unfamiliar. "I think that's not a true Christian principle. Jesus spoke to everyone. He was an inclu-



Sahar Ali

Hart will receive a Community Leader Award from the O.C. Human Relations Commission for the work she's done with SARAH and "extraordinary contributions to Orange County in the area of human and civil rights."

Hart said she was honored by the award but quickly credited many others for helping make SARAH a success.

"The first-century scholar Hillel said, 'The Torah says one thing and one thing only: Love thy neighbor as you love thyself. The rest is commentary,'" she said.

Good advice.

ON THE WEB

To learn more about SARAH, go to www.sarah4hope.org. To see videos, go to www.ocregister.com/life and scroll down to the RELIGION section.

sive person. ... Everyone was a part of his larger circle of love."

Price enjoys the SARAH meetings because "when we get together, all the barriers seem to melt away. We find in each other the same love for our families; the same love for life; the same respect for human life; and a wonderful connection through food, through laughter and through sharing of ideas."

She emphasized the importance of Hart's interfaith commitment. "Sande had an incredible vision when she started SARAH. ... And because of

Sande's wonderful, generous, compassionate heart, she has drawn to her so many people who see that vision as well. In my church we call it a vision of a world that works for everyone. And Sande holds that vision."

On Thursday, Hart will receive a Community Leader Award from the O.C. Human Relations Commission for the work she's done with SARAH and "extraordinary contributions to Orange County in the area of human and civil rights."

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