

Omahan, Obama on U.N. forum's agenda
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The leader of Omaha's Project Interfaith has been invited to talk about the organization at a U.N. conference in Turkey that's also on President Barack Obama's schedule.

Beth Katz, executive director of Project Interfaith, is scheduled to appear on a panel during a forum organized by the Alliance of Civilizations, a U.N. initiative that is aimed at bridging differences between Muslim nations and the West.

Obama is expected to stop by the forum in Istanbul on Tuesday, during an official visit to Turkey.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon are on the schedule. Participants include business executives, journalists, diplomats, scholars, youth groups from several continents, religious leaders, philanthropic foundations and leaders of grass-roots organizations such as the one Katz heads.

Forum organizers want to bring together a cross section of people to learn about bridging cultural and religious divides, said Daanish Maasood, an Alliance of Civilizations spokesman.

Katz doesn't know if she'll rub elbows with heads of state. She is scheduled to be part of a break-out session titled "Learning About and Across Differences."

The invitation came after Katz happened to sit next to an Alliance of Civilizations official last fall in Chicago at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. Katz told him about Project Interfaith's training programs for educators and health care workers. He recommended the organization for participation in the Istanbul forum.

Project Interfaith began in 2005 and provides education about different faiths through art exhibits, architectural tours, workshops and a speakers bureau, among other programs.

Katz said conference organizers were interested in the Omaha organization partly because they wouldn't have expected to find such an effort in this part of the United States.

She called the conference an exciting opportunity to introduce Project Interfaith to an international audience.

Said Katz, "I'm really looking forward not just to showing what we are doing in our community, but to see what people are doing in other communities."

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