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Video project volunteers have collected more than 300 video accounts of peoples' faiths. Back row, from left: Janet Voelker, Nya Taylor and Katy Clarke. Front row, from left: David DenBeste, Sierra Pirigy and Kourtney Rahder.

– Photo by Mitchell Warren

## Project Interfaith Exceeds Goal to Collect Video Diaries From People of All Faiths

**By Julien R. Fielding**  
**The Daily Record**

In the spring of 2010, eight teens, between the ages of 16 and 19, worked for six weeks on an Interfaith Youth Service Project for Project Interfaith, a non-profit organization started by Beth Katz in 2004. The goal was for them to volunteer their time at two local service sites and to keep video diaries on which they would share their experiences.

One of the participants, Emina Becirovic, a Creighton University student from Bosnia, was filming a video blog when someone came into her room. Upon learning that Becirovic was a Muslim, that same person elicited surprise. After all, how could the Bosnian be a Muslim? She wasn't even "brown."

Realizing that they could take this exploration of religion and stereotypes even further, Project Interfaith launched its Community Mosaic Video Project. The organization sent its team of 35 interviewers into the community, where they visited educational institutions, including the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Metropolitan Community College and Creighton University, and different places of worship.

Since they didn't want to limit who could participate in the project, they also scheduled visits to workplaces and have held several "open houses" at the Project Interfaith office at 115 S. 49<sup>th</sup> Ave. Another open house is scheduled for February 8 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

So far, they have been extremely successful. Volunteers have conducted more than 300 interviews with Omahans representing a wide variety of religious viewpoints, including Jews, Hindus, Muslims, atheists, Buddhists, and various Christian sects.

The objective of the video interviews, which last between two and five minutes, is to show the diversity of Omaha," said Sierra Pirigyi, an intern who has helmed the project. "Not everyone fits into a box," she added.

Anyone who participates in the project is asked to talk about his or her spiritual or religious identity, to discuss stereotypes associated with that identity, and then to offer experiences that he or she has had while living in Omaha. Participants simply record their thoughts on one of the organization's 14 handheld, flip cameras.

"We've been really surprised at how willing people are to talk about [these topics]," Katz said. "But people choose what they want to disclose, and if by the end of the interview, he or she doesn't feel comfortable; we will delete it. Only one person has chosen to do that.

"We're asking basic but personal questions that people aren't always comfortable talking about. Yet, the only way to get anywhere openly and honestly is to talk about some of these things and be willing to share."

Some groups, such as "pagans" and atheists, have been more reluctant to "come out" for fear of negative feedback. And yet, Katz explained that they have been really clear to everyone that the videos are intended for educational purposes and to open a dialogue. Furthermore, everyone involved with Project Interfaith has put his or her proverbial money where his or her mouth is; everyone has been interviewed. "When you see your peers sharing, it builds a certain trust," Katz said.

Due to the project's popularity, the final date on which interviews will be collected has been extended for several months; they will now conclude on March 1.

“We’re doing great,” Katz said. “We’ve been really amazed by the amount of public interest, and our new goal is to record 500 videos. We’ve been so fortunate that the volunteers have really taken this to the next level through their conviction and enthusiasm. They’ve created energy and momentum. Of the original 35 interviewers, only two of them haven’t continued. The effect this has had on them is very powerful. Each will also do an exit interview.”

So far the biggest surprise that Katz has experienced is not which religions they have encountered but where they have been encountered. For instance, while recording at the Hindu Temple, volunteers talked to people who didn’t necessarily identify themselves as Hindu but as Sikh or Jain. That same phenomenon was also seen at Christian churches, where people in attendance identified themselves with another denomination or even another faith.

“It just goes to show you the complexity of religion, and that people are more than their labels,” Katz said. “People crave a sense of community and that may or may not always align with one’s ideology.”

Another thing that has emerged from the project is how universal it is for people to feel boxed in by a label, she said. “These labels don’t give a full picture of who you are,” she added.

Once the interviews have concluded, the video segments will undergo very minor editing and then they will be uploaded to Project Interfaith’s website.

“We are working with Oxide Design to design the project,” Katz said.

Although they are still working out the details, they envision using the organization’s logo, which is a tree, and populating it with the faces of the people interviewed.

“As you move around, you will click on those [faces] identified with a category,” Katz said. “We will also have resources and discussion guides that connect to certain videos.”

Again, the overall purpose is to open a conversation about diversity and identity, and to challenge stereotypes. If all goes as planned, the Community Mosaic Video Project should be available for public viewing in the spring.

And, there may even be a second phase, during which artists from the local community will be invited to participate in a “physical exhibit.” They would essentially create another space in which visitors could experience the religious and cultural diversity of Omaha.

“We’re still figuring all of this out,” Katz said. “Fingers crossed. We’re hoping for a September launch. So far, this has exceeded our hopes and vision for it. We’re really excited about it.”

“As far as we know, this is the first of its kind,” Pirigyi added. Anyone who would still like the chance to be interviewed should contact Pirigyi at 933-4647 or send her an email at [sierra@projectinterfaithusa.org](mailto:sierra@projectinterfaithusa.org).

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