

Omaha Reads

The picks for this year are...
"Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir" by
"The Secret Garden" by Frances H

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Breaking down barriers

People of various religions find common
ground in a broad interview project.



Barriers

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By CHRISTOPHER BURBACH
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Melissa Rotolo had read anti-Islam books that made her scared of Muslims, and wanted to do something about that. Kael Sagheer had been challenged by her 17-year-old daughter to prove that Omaha is more diverse than it might seem.

Those motivations led the two women — one Christian, one Muslim — to volunteer to interview people about faith in an ambitious effort called Community Mosaic. They are among more than 30 volunteers who have been going to houses of worship, universities and other sites to conduct videotaped interviews of people on their beliefs about religion.

In the spring, the interviews will be posted on the Web site of Project Interfaith, the Omaha group behind the initiative. People will be able to click on different faith groups and see what local people have to say in their own words.



Sagheer

"We have 264 interviews right now, and counting," said Sierra Pirigy, the Project Interfaith intern who's coordinating Community Mosaic. "It will really show how diverse Omaha is, and how diverse faith traditions are. It's hard to place people in a box sometimes."

The interviews have come from interviewers' visits to such sites as a Hindu temple, several mosques and synagogues, Baha'i gatherings, churches of various Christian denominations, the University of Nebraska at Omaha and Creighton University.

More have been conducted in open houses at Project Interfaith's office. The non-profit group will host two more open houses for people who want to be interviewed at its office, 115 S. 49th Ave. They will be Jan. 19, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.; and Feb. 8, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

They're looking for more religious and civic sites to conduct interviews in Omaha and Council Bluffs.

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with a pet ocelot, died Sunday, she was 80.
Francis, who was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2007 and underwent surgery and chemotherapy, died of complications of pancreatic cancer at a retirement home in Santa Barbara, said Jane Uemura, her daughter. Friends and family members were with her, said a family spokeswoman, Melissa Fitch.

A shapely and pretty blonde with a signature beauty mark next to her lower lip, Francis was a former child model and radio actress when she first came to notice on the big screen in the early 1950s.

She had leading or supporting roles in more than 30 movies, including "Bad Day at Black Rock," "Battle Cry," "Blackboard Jungle," "The Hired Gun," "Don't Go Near the Water," "Brainstorm," "Funny Girl" and "Hook, Line and Sinker."

She also achieved cult status as one of the stars of "Forbidden Planet," the 1956 MGM movie co-starring Walter Pidgeon and Leslie Nielsen and featuring a helpful robot named Robby.

Francis, however, never became a major movie star and was more frequently seen on television as a guest star on scores of series from the late '50s and decades beyond, including an episode of "The Twilight Zone" in which she played a department-store mannequin who comes to life at night.

But it's as the star of "Honey West," the first female detective to be featured in a weekly TV series, that Francis may be best remembered.

Based on the title character in G.G. Fickling's series of Honey West paperback mysteries launched in 1957, Francis' Honey West was introduced to TV viewers in an episode of "Burke's Law" in the spring of 1965.

The episode served as the pilot for the half-hour "Honey West" series, for which Aaron



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Actress Anne Francis poses with Robby the Robot at the 50th anniversary of the film "Forbidden Planet." Francis was the love interest in the 1950s science-fiction cult-classic.

Spelling was the executive producer and which made its debut in fall 1965.

In it, West, who inherited a Los Angeles detective agency from her late father, had a partner named Sam Bolt (played by John Ericson), shared an apartment with her Aunt Meg (Irene Hervey) and owned a man-hating pet ocelot named Bruce Biteabit.

In what Francis later described as "a tongue-in-cheek, female James Bond," her karate-chopping private eye drove a custom-built Cobra convertible sports car and, when necessary, worked out of a specially equipped mobile surveillance van that masqueraded as a TV service vehicle.

Mosaic: Project is opening eyes about city's religions

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The interviews were supposed to wrap up Thursday, but the project was extended because of community interest, said Beth Katz, Project Interfaith executive director.

Of 35 volunteer interviewers, 33 said they were willing to keep doing it.

Omaha's diversity is reflected in the interview teams themselves. They came from 14 different faiths and belief traditions, Pirigy said. Most, like Rotolo and Sagheer, were strangers to each other before they became involved this fall.

Rotolo is a 45-year-old mother of boys, ages 5 and 2, who works part-time for a lawyer.

She belongs to a Presbyterian church, but calls herself a spiritual seeker.

"One of the reasons I joined this project was I was reading some books that were very anti-Muslim, by a former Muslim,"

Rotolo said. "It just scared me to death. I thought I need to get over this fear. I need to meet some Muslims."

Meanwhile, Kael Sagheer, a 42-year-old teacher at Phoenix Academy who's married to a man from Pakistan, joined partly because of their children, especially their 17-year-old daughter. Sagheer grew up in Kearney as a Methodist, converted to Islam for theological reasons in her 20s and then married a Muslim man. She has lived in Islamabad, Pakistan; Sapporo, Japan; and Dallas, among other places, and finds Omaha "a very welcoming place."

"We're a Muslim family, and it's just a little difficult being different," Sagheer said. "I wanted her to see that there are a lot of people in Omaha who are different."

She said she told her daughter that, and her daughter's response was "Prove it."

Mother and daughter were

paired with Rotolo.

They've done interviews at Omaha's Hindu Temple, Countryside Community Church and First Unitarian Church, as well as a Baha'i center, Catholic churches and Metropolitan Community Church.

Each interview consists of four main questions. They ask how people religiously identify themselves and why, what stereotype or myth about their beliefs affects them, and do they find Omaha a welcoming place, and why or why not.

The actual interviews take about two to eight minutes each. But there's a lot of conversation before and after, in which the interviewers said they learned a lot.

They've also come to know each other a little bit outside of the interviews.

"Kael and her teen-aged daughter so generously met with me for lunch one day when I wanted to say, 'I'm scared of people like

you, can you answer some questions," Rotolo said.

They did, she said. Sagheer said she admired Rotolo "for having the intelligence and guts to seek that out."

Rotolo said the lunch and interviews have helped break down her fears and open her understanding.

Sagheer is not sure she has persuaded her daughter about her hometown. For herself, she said she went into the project thinking she knew a lot about religion, and has found out there's a lot she didn't know.

"I'm learning something new every day," Sagheer said.

Rotolo said the experience has been wonderful.

"I hope a lot of people look at (the videos) once we get them on-line," Rotolo said. "I hope it breaks down a lot of barriers for people, just like it's doing for the interviewers."

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