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## A night for breaking fast and barriers

By [Julianne Hanckel](#) Day Staff Writer

### 'Sharing Ramadan' event held to promote cross-cultural respect

**New London** - Nearly two weeks into Ramadan, 300 people from various religious and ethnic backgrounds gathered Sunday inside the Crozier-Williams College Center on the campus of Connecticut College to experience "Sharing Ramadan," an event that offered guests a chance to experience the Muslim month of fasting.

"We're gathered here today to share the month of Ramadan with our friends and reach out and create new friendships," said Mongi Dhaouadi, executive director for the Connecticut chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CT).

"We'd like to send a strong message to many others, the skeptics, who doubted this was possible. We do share a common goal, we'd like to be friends, respect one another and listen to one another," he said. The third annual event was conceived as an outreach for diversity and interfaith communities.

Ramadan is the month on the Islamic lunar calendar during which Muslims abstain from food and drink from the break of dawn to sunset. They end their daylong fasts with a meal after sunset prayers. The act of fasting is performed to learn discipline, self-restraint and generosity while obeying God's commandments.

Anysa Dhaouadi, 15, provided insight to Ramadan from a youth's perspective.

"Because Ramadan comes earlier and earlier every year, it goes through every season," Dhaouadi said. She explained that she fasts despite the weather or stresses of school and that she faces questions from her classmates who do not understand why she chooses not to eat at lunch time.

"I try to keep my mind off of food. I remember showing my dad my lunchbox still full of food from my first day of fasting in kindergarten. I still feel good that I refrained from giving in," she said.

The end of Ramadan is marked by communal prayers called "Eid al-Fitr," or Feast of the Fast-Breaking. Connecticut College professor Mab Segrest, who was invited to the event, was inspired to learn about Ramadan.

"The event that happened in Bridgeport and the mosque debate in New York made me want to do something that I've wanted to do for a while: come to Ramadan and participate," Segrest said.

On Aug. 6, a small group of Christian protesters descended on a Bridgeport mosque, yelling "Islam is a lie" at worshippers as they entered the mosque, preparing for the beginning of Ramadan.

Before Sunday's dinner Segrest, of New London, was able to observe a traditional prayer service, held after breaking fast with two dates. Then she ate a pakora, a deep fried vegetable or lentil fritter, at 7:38 p.m., marking the official sunset.

"It was very moving to observe the prayer. I was honored to be invited into their worship space," she said.

The evening's special guests included Rabbi Carl Astor of Beth El synagogue in New London, the Rev. Carolyn Patierno of All Souls Unitarian Congregation in New London, and Pastor Benjamin K. Watts of Shiloh Baptist Church in New London.

Watts said the actions by a small group of protesters come at "one of the most Islam-phobic eras in the United States."

"This is a time where people are displaying hatred and ignorance of times long gone. There are other faces of Christians. There are people willing to stand with you," Watts said.

Laura Krodel of Salem attended the event with an open mind. She said she will share her positive experience with others who may have misconceptions about Islamic culture.

"It's a fear of what people really don't understand. Look how many people are here tonight. This event included everyone," Krodel said.

Krodel, a Christian, is a history teacher at Fitch High School in Groton and said she has also taught world religion.

"I need to share this experience with people who may not be so open-minded to learning. There needs to be an understanding that not all Christians are out burning the Quran."

Shirley Zaccheo is a Christian and operations manager for CAIR, the Connecticut council on Islamic

relations. She is married to Mongi Dhaouadi, and through their inter-faith marriage, they have four children who are being raised Muslim.

"This is our mission. This is what it's all about. We're one country and we have to live together. We don't have to agree, but we have to have discussions and listen," Zaccheo said.

"Right now you're basically standing in the United Nations. We're all here doing the same thing, just living." Mongi Dhaouadi said the current debate about the location of a mosque near ground zero in New York has turned political and that the potential building will "be like a YMCA for Muslims in lower Manhattan."

He said the debate should not be about the way people feel.

"We don't think that Muslims' rights, or anyone's rights, have to be based off of feelings, polls or what the politicians think. The insensitive thing to do is accuse all Muslims. We absolutely refuse that notion," he said.

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