**Lohmann: 'We are more similar than we are different'**

As polls were closing Tuesday evening, bringing an end to another Election Day that emphasized the differences among us, Faiza Sadiq, Ammara Ahmed and their friends from West End Islamic Center gathered to make dinner in a place that might seem surprising: the kitchen at Christ Church Episcopal in Glen Allen.

It actually wasn't unusual at all. Sadiq, Ahmed and the others were preparing a meal for homeless guests from CARITAS who are staying at Christ Church this week, the continuation of a partnership forged between the two neighboring religious groups. A moment of shared grace in a too-often divided world.

"We are more similar than we are different," Ahmed said of West End and Christ Church working together. "We all want to help out the community. It doesn't matter who it is.

"At the end of the day, we are all human."

The groups have been working together since the Muslim congregation proposed building a mosque on Shady Grove Road, just down the street from Christ Church, whose leadership noted the contentiousness from some corners of the community surrounding the proposed mosque.

Christ Church, at first through church member Mary Gravely, reached out to West End leadership, offering support.

The gesture was most appreciated, said Sadiq, who was born in Pakistan but has lived in the U.S. since she was a month old.

She grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in Tennessee and Mississippi, where she and her family felt welcomed. However, she sensed a deterioration in the attitudes of some Americans toward Muslims after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a situation that has worsened in recent years with inflammatory rhetoric and policies such as the U.S. ban on travelers from some mostly Muslim nations.

"When Mary reached out, it was a really nice thing," Sadiq said. "It felt like America used to be."

The two congregations have gotten together for community service projects, such as CARITAS, and interfaith meals, as well as for scripture studies where they compare theological roots, beliefs and interpretations.

"There are so many things we have in common," Gravely said. "There are people who will argue until their last breath that there are so many things we don't have in common, but I think it's better to look at what we do have in common."

Good food, for instance. The lovely aromas of Tuesday evening's dinner filled the sanctuary at Christ Church: chicken curry, rice, veggies, cakes and casseroles.

Casseroles? That sounds like church food, I joked.

Ahmed laughed.

"We have similar food," she said, "but just with more spices."

About a dozen West End members prepared Tuesday's dinner, and their children served the meal to about 30 CARITAS guests.

"It is always the best meal of the week, hands down, and the guests love it," said the Rev. Shirley Smith Graham, rector of Christ Church, in an email. "We always work hard to do the nice touches so that shelter guests will feel like guests at our home and not just folks seeking a shelter of last resort. But WEIC fulfills this hope to its fullest measure. [On] WEIC Night, the guests are not only fed; they are transported in an experience of sight, smell and taste that hints at a journey of possibility that otherwise feels out of reach to people with very limited options. Through WEIC's partnership, we experience grace upon grace."

Said Gravely: "I cannot tell you how amazing it is to be standing in an Episcopal church working alongside Muslim mothers and fathers and children to serve those in need. If only we could all live and serve together like that. It is truly a joyous experience."

Construction on West End's mosque, approved by Henrico County's Planning Commission in 2012, remains a work in progress. Meantime, the congregation meets for Friday prayers at an Elks lodge and for other events at a local school.

When the mosque is completed, it will include a large basement where the congregation can set up a community food pantry and host events such as CARITAS meals, Ahmed said.

At which point, Gravely said, "we'll come over there and serve."

**Lohmann: She grew prize-winning daffodils and made friends for life**

I've often maintained the best thing about this sort of work - besides the lack of a requirement for heavy lifting - is the opportunity to meet people I otherwise would have no business getting to know, and the lasting connections that develop.

Margaret Galloway Ford was one of those people.

I met Margaret in April 2002, having been sent her way by an editor wanting a story about Margaret and her granddaughter, Kristi Sadler, then 15, who had cleaned up at the Virginia Daffodil Society's annual show at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden the previous weekend, winning all kinds of ribbons and awards for their daffodils.

We made arrangements to meet at Kristi's home on a weekday afternoon. Now, you probably don't want to take your child to cover a planning commission meeting, but since this interview involved a grandmother and a granddaughter talking about growing flowers - and I was running a little short on child care that afternoon - I figured, why not? So my 5-year-old son, Jack, accompanied me. Turned out to be, if not a life-changing moment, then surely a life-enhancing one.

As I recall, we sat at the dining room table and listened as Margaret and Kristi told us about daffodils and good soil, but mostly about their relationship and how raising flowers had brought them closer and was so much fun.

Margaret laughed as she recalled growing up in Lakeside, across from the former Hermitage Country Club (now Belmont Golf Course) where her father, Tommy Galloway, was the golf pro, and how her mother used to make her weed the garden.

"It was the most boring thing in the world," Margaret told us. "I said I would never have a garden."

Decades later? "I hope my mother knows how much I enjoy it now," she said.

Through it all, Jack sat there quietly enthralled, which was quite a good thing since he usually didn't mind offering his opinion on a wide variety of topics at preschool, where he was once asked to refrain from bringing his beloved stuffed cat, Kitty, to class because Kitty had been disruptive by "talking too much." Kitty, you might have deduced, sounded a lot like Jack.

After the interview, Margaret and Kristi gave us a tour of the yard, showing us different varieties of daffodils. Their enthusiasm was contagious. Jack took it all in, asked questions, was exceedingly polite and seemed like a gardener-to-be, which he really was since he always enjoyed visiting his grandmother in Norfolk who had a genuine green thumb and had a backyard that was pretty much a pick-your-own farm in miniature.

This was also during his phase of being infatuated with tractors and farm machinery in general. At the end of many days, his pockets were filled with what he called "nature": pine straw, pine cones, hickory nuts, long blades of grass and peculiar weeds that looked like beautiful flowers to a little boy. He also had started saving coins in his piggybank so he could, as he put it, "buy land."

In the ensuing 17 years, Jack has developed many other interests, and he has moved on from toy tractors, but not daffodils. That's because of Margaret Ford.

We didn't realize this at the beginning, but Margaret possessed an unmatched enthusiasm in her effort to excite younger generations about growing daffodils. She wanted them to love it as much as she did. She enjoyed working with school groups and Girl Scouts, introducing them to a passion she didn't know she had until a decade before we met.

Her story went like this: She was helping her garden club provide coffee for the area's first big daffodil show and, on a whim, she plucked a pretty daffodil out of her yard and entered it in the contest. She left the flower show and thought nothing more of it - until she got a call later in the afternoon informing her she had won "best in show."

"Isn't that a miracle?" she said.

Some weeks after our visit with Margaret and Kristi in 2002, a letter arrived in the mail for Jack: Margaret had given him a membership in the Virginia Daffodil Society.

That fall, we planted a few new daffodil bulbs - some of which I'm pretty sure came from Margaret - and combined with those we already had from his Norfolk grandmother, Jack was off and running. The next spring, he entered flowers in the show at the botanical garden, and won a red ribbon. Second place. He was overjoyed.

Jack became a regular at the show, where we'd see Margaret and her husband, Skip, who also was a daffodil man. Over the years, Margaret and Skip would share bulbs and books about daffodils with Jack and always encourage him to keep growing. In one of the books, she included a sticky note pointing out a photograph of the variety that earned them their first "best in show": a Redhill, an ivory-white flower with a red-orange cup. The book with its sticky note is still on Jack's bookshelf.

So, Margaret was thrilled, more than a dozen years after they first met, when Jack informed her that he had written one of the essays for his college application about growing daffodils and what it meant to him. Even when he went off to college in the Northeast, he would hop a train home so he could be here for the weekend of the daffodil show. He enjoyed winning ribbons, but he liked seeing Margaret more.

Margaret Ford died last week. She was 86. She lived a full life with the love of family and friends. She had interests beyond growing daffodils, but pretty much everything she did seemed to involve making other people's lives as happy and as full as hers.

This year's early daffodils are just beginning to poke their green leaves through the cold soil. No doubt whenever the trumpet-like flowers bloom in all of their glory this spring - and every spring to come - we will think of Margaret.

Skip called the other day to pass along a message from Margaret: She wanted us to know how proud she was of Jack and how grateful she was for having known him.

That feeling goes both ways.

**Lohmann: Armstrong High School is staging its first in-house theatrical production in decades**

The curtains are new and actually close all the way, the burned-out stage lights have been replaced, and the stage itself has been cleared of the boxes and gear that had turned it into a glorified storage locker.

The 500-seat auditorium at Armstrong High School is ready once again for a full-on theatrical production. A spotlight borrowed from another school is the finishing touch.

Students and teachers at Armstrong will present the musical "Once on This Island" on Wednesday and Thursday, the first in-house theatrical production at the school in at least two decades. Maybe even more years than that, though no one can remember for sure.

"It's very ambitious," said Cristian Koshock, an art teacher who is in his 18th year at Armstrong and one of a group of teachers who came together to work on the production. "The talents are being nudged out of people."

History teacher Graham Sturm has become skilled with a power saw as he has led construction of the set; Jennifer Howard, an instructional assessment analyst at the school, has been creating costumes and headdresses. Students have emerged with singing and dancing talents no one knew about.

"It's kind of magical the way it's coming together," Koshock said as we stood on the stage before a rehearsal last week.

Such a stage production is a routine occurrence at many schools, but at a place like Armstrong, which serves Richmond's East End, it is a monumental achievement to hold such an event. The school has had difficulty meeting the state's full standards of accreditation, weathered high turnover among teachers and principals, and even took a hit to its identity in 2004 when the old Armstrong on 31st Street closed and merged with Kennedy High. The new merged school took the name of Armstrong, operating out of the Kennedy facility on Cool Lane.

Auditions for "Once on This Island" began in January, but the groundwork was laid long before, as the school has tried to rebuild its arts offerings through an after-school program funded by a federal grant that included student participation in theater field trips and workshops and the hiring of part-time teachers in those specialties.

The impetus for a production originated with Topaz Wise, a special-education teacher with a musical background, who went to the administration and suggested a student show.

"This is the only school where I've been that everybody [said], 'Let's figure out how we can do this for the kids,'" said Wise, who is director of the production. "Dr. Bell just made it happen."

Willie J. Bell Jr., in his second year as principal at Armstrong, called together a team of faculty members last fall and essentially told them to "make it happen."

"When I was a principal in North Carolina, we did one, and it was the first one in school history," he said. "It was a big deal."

It only seemed natural to him to have a show at Armstrong.

"Because for one thing I know that our kids are so talented and it gives another perspective to their education experience," he said. "It's not just about sitting in desks and receiving information from teachers, books and all this. Kids don't get the opportunity to show their true selves outside the classroom. This gives them another outlet. This is just, I believe, the premiere to something bigger that we have going down the road."

"Once on This Island" is based on a 1985 novel set on a tropical island, telling the story of a peasant girl using the power of love to bridge different social classes. The original Broadway production ran in the 1990s, and a Broadway revival closed earlier this year. Koshock described it as "like 'Romeo and Juliet' meets the island, the haves and the have-nots."

Theater teacher Jullianne Kramer, the show's producer, is in her first year teaching high school, splitting her time between Armstrong and Community High, which is why about half the cast comes from Community. I met her in the Armstrong cafeteria, which is the "crossroad," as Sturm called it, between the regular school day and after-school programs such as athletics and theater, where students gather to snack before going on with the rest of their afternoon.

Besides their lines, the students are learning about "commitment and teamwork," Kramer said, and "the coolest thing is to see the camaraderie."

It's also been pretty cool to see students, such as senior Jasmine Richardson, display talents others didn't realize they had. Richardson is one of the musical's stars, playing Ti Moune, the peasant girl, though it took some encouragement for her to even audition. Wise provided the push, having heard Richardson sing last year by chance when Richardson sought her help on a song she was working on for a program outside school.

"She opened her mouth in the choir room and I spent the first 10 minutes like …," at which point Wise's faced turned into an emotive "Wow!"

Wise calls her "our beautiful surprise."

"A lot of teachers are ill-prepared for what they're about to see come out of this little child," Wise said with a laugh about Richardson's upcoming debut on Wednesday.

When "Once on This Island" was chosen, Wise knew she wanted Richardson to audition for the role of Ti Moune, but Richardson resisted. "I've never done anything like that," she said. However, she relented, auditioned and got the part.

"Exciting and nerve-wracking" is how Richardson described her feelings as the public performances grow nearer, but also kind of thrilled to be there. She hopes to attend Reynolds Community College after graduation and then Virginia Commonwealth University for a degree in the performing arts because she likes the liberation she feels on stage.

"It's like I'm not myself," she said. "I'm shy; Ti Moune is a very adventurous and bubbly."

In the hallway outside the auditorium, Monica Murray stopped to chat before she went into rehearsal. She's an assistant principal who is playing Ti Moune's mother in the show.

"It's been a dream of mine to be in a musical," she said.

Murray was a proponent of the production along with Bell because of the complementary instruction it offers to the academics of the regular school day and the introduction to workplace possibilities when it comes to the performing arts and because, she said, "This is Armstrong."

"Armstrong/ Kennedy was the hub for music and all of that back in the day," said Murray, who graduated from Richmond schools. "I remember coming to this auditorium for all sorts of citywide events. Everybody knew a talent show was going to happen here every year. We want to start bringing it back. We have so much talent in this building."

And being on stage with students as a fellow cast member?

"It's beautiful," she said. "It's an absolutely beautiful sight to see."