

## Jews, Somalis launch mentoring program



The Jewish-Somali Project launched last week at a Toronto high school. Announcing the initiative were, from left, James Morton, Mark Persaud, Bernie Farber, Howard English and Digal Haio.

TORONTO - Its proponents didn't quite bill it as a light unto the nation, but they came pretty close.

Last week, representatives of Jewish and Somali community organizations announced a joint mentorship program that they suggested could serve as a model of ethnic co-operation for other Canadians.

Spokespeople for Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), UJA Federation of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Somali Congress (CSC) gathered at Kipling Collegiate Institute in the city's west end to announce the partnership. The project was initiated under the auspices of the Canadian International Peace Project (CIPP), one of whose governors, law professor Ed Morgan, is past president of CJC and an honorary patron of the CSC.

"The Jewish-Somali project presents a paradigm shift in our approach to multiculturalism wherein two very different and diverse groups are working together to assist in building stronger communities," said Mark Persaud, president and CEO of CIPP. "For Canada to avoid the serious problems of integration of diaspora communities as currently being experienced by European and other countries, it is imperative that as Canadians we exercise bold and innovative leadership to promote greater social cohesion. The CIPP is providing such important leadership."

Howard English, vice-president of corporate communications for UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, called the program "a breakthrough" and said the initiative represented an example of Canadian values at work at a time when "strife is taking place around the world."

The initiative could serve as "a role model" for other Canadians, while permitting the Jewish community to "give back...by helping other communities facing the challenges we did decades ago." It also marked the "first formalized relationship between two such diverse communities," he said.

Bernie Farber, CEO of Canadian Jewish Congress, said "in no other place in the universe could it happen.

"Many Canadians might be surprised the Muslim and Jewish communities are coming together for this project, because often when we talk about the issues, sadly it becomes political, which only leads to strife. But today,

with the CSC and the CJC, the stress is on the 'Canadian' part of our names... Together, we are trying to forge a path and make a statement we haven't been able to make before. This is more than just a dialogue."

The Jewish-Somali Project will match Jewish professionals with young Somalis who are new to the workforce. The federation will use its contacts to recruit volunteer mentors and develop the organizational infrastructure to make the project work, English said. There will be no financial allocation by the federation, he added.

While no timeline for the mentoring program was announced, English suggested it could begin by the end of the year.

In an interview with The CJN, CSC director Digal Haio said there are more than 150,000 Somalis in Toronto, who mostly arrived between 1991 and 1996. Young Somalis are struggling to enter a number of professions and suffer from a lack of support by experienced professionals. The CSC "reached out and expressed the desire to meet other communities in Canada that faced similar challenges. The CIPP facilitated the contact with the Jewish community," which was the only one to respond, Haio said.

Asked whether a partnership with Jewish organizations was problematic for a Somali organization, Haio said there was "no hesitation," in forging the alliance. CSC's goal is to build a strong leadership cadre for the community and "the Canadian Jewish community was kind and generous enough to help us." Politics, she added, "were left aside."

Haio said the CSC was created as an alternative to the "mainstream" Somali

community organizations that are male-dominated and limited "to a certain age group."

CSC's board consists of five students, including three women. It considers itself an advocacy organization while the other Somali groups are focused on "settlement," she said.

The first mentorship program announced last week will pair James Morton, past president of the Ontario Bar Association, with law student Ayan Hersi. Morton is also CSC legal counsel.

Persaud also announced creation of the Somali-Jewish Friendship Scholarship Fund for post-secondary students of Somali background. The scholarship is designed to assist the development of Somali community leaders. Businessman and philanthropist Nathan Jacobson has agreed to support the first scholarship, which includes one year of university studies, all expenses paid.

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