

# INTERACTION

A URI PUBLICATION



## WOMEN OF URI

In recognition of International Women's Day, we asked a few of URI's women leaders to talk about what it means to be a leader, a woman, and a peacemaker.

### *What inspired you to start taking a leadership role in your community?*

**Lee Ziv, Musaique CC, Israel:** The need to support the community we are living in, knowing that we are responsible for our lives. Leadership is something I am still trying to digest inside myself—to find out what that role is and to be in leadership with other leaders around me. When we first met, Charles Gibbs said, (I think it was a saying from Africa) "If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together." This is like a mantra for me. I cannot do things alone. To be a leader today is to be in a network of leaders carrying the same vision—not just local, but global.

**Despina Namwembe, URI-Great Lakes Regional Coordinator:** Losing my mother at an adolescent age was the

biggest stimulating factor for me to be a leader. My mother nurtured us with a lot of self-reliance. [When she died] I had to stop behaving like an adolescent and put into practice what my mother and grandmother always taught us: to work hard, support and take care of others, show generosity and wish for other good things in life through supportive actions.

**Outub Jehan Kidwai, URI-West India Regional Coordinator:** I belong to a family that was involved in India's freedom struggle and laborer and farmers' rights. I was in my first year in college when we witnessed the communal violence after the demolition of an historic Mosque, and incidents continued for months. I asked my father, "What makes men become so atrocious that they could not see people pleading for life?" He replied, "We are religious but not spiritual." The wisdom in his reply brought an upheaval in my soul.

*continued inside*



Dear Friends,

When I was a young woman starting my career in theatre in the mid 1970's, there were almost no women in prominent positions within the theatre community. For women of color, the opportunities were even fewer. I learned at a young age that as a woman I needed to fight harder to have my voice

heard, so I started a multi-cultural theatre company with two female colleagues. It was one way to address a void that still persists decades later.

After nearly 20 years in the arts, a change in my life circumstances left me alone to raise a child. That experience led me to a deep calling to be in service to low income and immigrant communities, which eventually led me to interfaith organizing, and a little over two years ago, to URI. Along the way I have benefited from being mentored by strong women, among them two Catholic nuns who found a way to lead in spite of the lack of opportunities within the church hierarchy.

I am drawn to URI's Principle 8, "We practice equitable participation of women and men in all aspects of the URI."

*I am inspired daily by women in URI, sometimes moved to tears by their courage and creativity*

URI has many strong women, more than I could possibly mention. And I am inspired daily, sometimes moved to tears, by their courage and creativity. At 90 years young, Rita Semel, URI's first Global Council Chair, is a tireless advocate for interfaith cooperation and social justice. And, of course, Yoland Trevino, URI's current Global Council Chair, is a leader not just in the URI community, but among women of spirit all over the world. Her vision and leadership in bringing the Indigenous and their wisdom into URI is well known in our network.

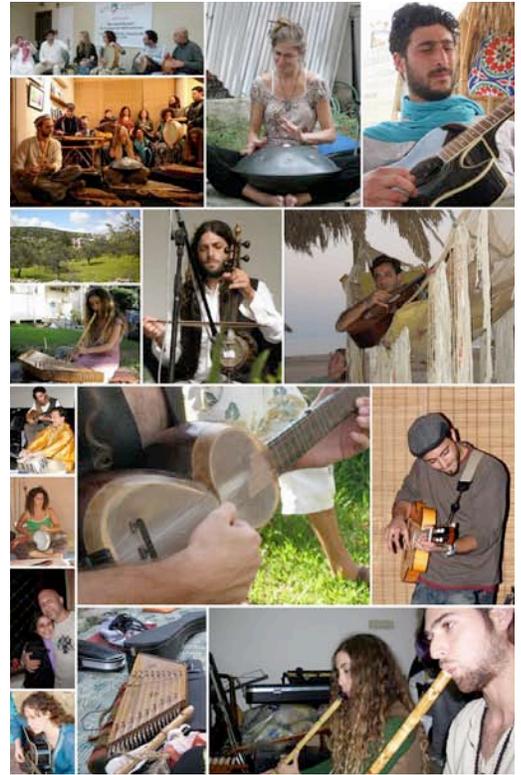
Even as we celebrate the accomplishments of URI's women leaders, we must acknowledge the barriers that women leaders still face every day - from the United States, where gender stereotypes of leadership still prevent women from breaking through the "glass ceiling"; to India and China where girl infanticide is still in practice. And while women's active role in the Arab Spring brings hope, it is bound to bring new challenges for women's leadership.

As we celebrate International Women's Day on March 8, with the theme of Connecting Girls, Inspiring Futures, it's time to revisit Principle 8 and redouble our efforts to ensure that the strong women in our network are mentoring younger women; that we support Cooperation Circles dedicated to educating girls; and that we recognize there is much work to be done in ensuring that women are equal participants, not just within URI, but in every country in the world.

Debra Ballinger Bernstein, Associate Executive Director

# MUSAIQUE

Music Without Boundaries



## Musaique

**In Concert - One Night Only!**

Friday, March 23 at 8pm  
Jewish Community Center - San Francisco  
Tickets available at [www.jccsf.org/arts](http://www.jccsf.org/arts)

Musaique is a URI Cooperation Circle and acclaimed group of musicians and peacebuilders from throughout the Middle East, breaking down boundaries between religions and nations through music.

Visit [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org) for more information.

Made possible in part by a grant from the Koret Foundation.

**GLOBAL COUNCIL PRESIDENT**  
The Rt. Rev. William E. Swing

**GLOBAL COUNCIL CHAIR**  
Yoland Trevino

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**  
The Rev. Canon Charles P. Gibbs

**ASSOCIATE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**  
Debra Ballinger Bernstein

To donate, visit [www.uri.org/get\\_involved/give](http://www.uri.org/get_involved/give) or contact Regan Murphy, [rmurphy@uri.org](mailto:rmurphy@uri.org), 415-561-2300 x17

## Rosalia Gutierrez

Rosalia is very active in URI's CC de los Pueblos Indígenas de Argentina, which helps indigenous young people from rural Argentina integrate into city life without losing their "essential wisdom," and has brought Indigenous voices into international interfaith and environmental conversations.

## Rita Semel

When Rita turned 90 this year, the mayor of San Francisco declared Rita Semel Day, and City leaders turned out *en masse* to celebrate her legacy. From helping found the San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race during the civil rights movement, to leading the San Francisco Interfaith Council CC into the post-9/11 era and her instrumental role in the birth and growth of URI, she is one of the interfaith movement's most dedicated leaders.

## Lee Ziv

Lee is an Israeli peace activist and co-founder of URI CC, Musaique, devoted to peacebuilding through music. With members from all over the Middle East, representing a diversity of faiths, Musaique is an honoree at this year's Circles of Light. Lee is also part of the Tamera community, a peace research village in Portugal.

## WOMEN OF URI continued from front cover

### Rosalia Gutierrez, CC de los Pueblos Indígenas de

**Argentina:** My spiritual name is Spirit of the Wind, and from that you know who I am because we know what the wind is. Life inspired me because I am from an indigenous Kolla family. I was inspired to stand up when I noticed our community was accustomed to being silenced. My father told me stories about



Rosalia Gutierrez

how he had suffered when harvesting sugar cane, and other terrible stories.

But I was inspired and encouraged by the happiness of my people. I learned to celebrate life. Recognizing these two realities, suffering and happiness, I could structure my life.

### *Who are the important female role models in your life?*

**Rosalia:** When women are asked to point out leaders, we always think of men. This is what we learn as children. But after facing many difficult situations as an indigenous woman, I recognize many models that give me strength: feminists, Indigenous, Palestinians, Africans, the religious, atheists, those in URI, women in politics, those who died defending their ideals, the courageous that raise their voice and break the silence.

There is a great feminine model for me: Mother Earth. Her wisdom inspires me when I open my eyes each morning. She doesn't discriminate. She gives us the air that we breathe.

### *What unique qualities do women bring to leadership?*

**Rita Semel, first URI Global Council Chair, USA:** We bring compassion and we bring juggling. Women juggle their husbands, their children, their jobs, all at same time. We bring the ability to work in coalition and by consensus. We don't feel the need to always be right.



Rita Semel

**Lee:** We understand the quality of giving birth, of taking a vision and manifesting it in reality. From this process we have a lot of compassion, a very high feminine quality. It creates a space for containing. In a leadership role, you need to be a person who can listen and contain the other. Even the enemy who thinks so different - has a place in your community too. We are able to find ways to communicate and build spaces of trust.



Lee Ziv

### *What unique qualities do women bring to peacebuilding?*

**Rita:** We have children. I have yet to meet a mother who wants her children to go to war. Most of us don't have that need to fight it out.

**Outub:** A woman has the heart of the nurturer. The nurturer cannot become an agent of destruction. As a peacebuilder she can envision a world where her children and those of others will be safe and can live a dignified life. A creator knows the value of creation. A mother knows the value of life.

**Despina:** Most women's leadership is more about service than ego and competition. Women feel a lot of work satisfaction if they are able to transform a community. It is an intrinsic love that means supporting, nurturing and working for the betterment of humanity.

### *As a woman leader, have you faced any roadblocks within your faith tradition or in dealing with people from other faiths?*

**Anqa Zarish, URI Youth Ambassador, Pakistan:** In East Asia women can't do anything. I was unable to go to the Malaysia Young Leaders Training. I am not allowed to travel alone. I have to take my father or brother or someone else with me to go to programs. But my father and mother are really supportive; they help me go anywhere I want. Many colleagues are not allowed to go anywhere.



UNITED RELIGIONS INITIATIVE

The Presidio  
PO Box 29242  
San Francisco, CA 94129

[www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org)

NON-PROFIT  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA  
PERMIT NO. 297



UNITED RELIGIONS INITIATIVE HONORS

**MUSAIQUE**

Music Without Boundaries



March 17

For sponsorship information or tickets, visit [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org).  
Made possible in part by a grant from the Koret Foundation.

## Qutub Jehan Kidwai

Qutub is the URI-West India Regional Coordinator based in Mumbai, India. She works with women in rural areas of India to combat domestic violence and the cultural and social pressure to engage in female infanticide.

## Anqa Zarish

Anqa is a 2011 URI Youth Ambassador from Pakistan. She helps run a school for homeless children in a neighborhood where people are suspicious of Christian teachers, whom they fear will try to convert their children. In response, Anqa and her colleagues have brought in Muslim teachers to hold an Islamic study every week for the children. It is this sort of cooperation that she believes will change attitudes in society.

## Despina Namwembe

Despina is the URI-Great Lakes Regional Coordinator and a respected interfaith leader in Uganda, where she has created an intergenerational, multi-faith and cross-sector network committed to preventing youth recruitment into extremist organizations.

**Qutub:** Being a woman and not being challenged is impossible. I have been working on the legal empowerment of women, and must continually challenge misogynist and patriarchal dictates. That invites the wrath of religious leaders. The irony is I am promoting the truth given in the scripture. I was fortunate enough to be trained in Quranic interpretation and legal reforms so that the religious leaders of my community would not be able to counter my knowledge.

**Lee:** It is not always easy in the Middle East. Sometimes you feel pressure from men, but it is about the courage of the woman and believing in her place in the world. Jewish, Muslim, Christian, it doesn't matter. It is the culture of the Middle East for men to lead. I respond by continuing to do what I believe as a woman, and not being afraid to write and say what I think, but to do it with a lot of respect and sensitivity.



Qutub Jehan Kidwai

### *How did you get involved with URI and what has URI done to nurture or inspire you?*

**Anqa:** Sister Sabina [Coordinator of the URI-Pakistan Women's Desk] came to our church and talked about her work. I got a chance to visit India for the URI assembly in 2008, and I got training from the Young Leaders

Program, which was really helpful and a big step for me. I am an organic chemist by profession and never thought I would be provided with such a platform to be a young leader.



Anqa Zarish

**Despina:** I was working as an intern at the Uganda Joint Christian Council when I was invited to a URI meeting in Nairobi in 1998. When we came back, we formed what we called the URI Uganda Committee and since then, I have been involved with URI first at that local level, then as a Trustee for two terms and currently as Regional Coordinator for URI Great Lakes Region. URI has taught me to value my faith but also respect people

from other faith traditions through appreciating them as individuals first, then the rest follows.

**Lee:** The beginning for me was three years ago in Jordan at a URI Middle East North Africa (MENA) gathering. For an Israeli woman to come and meet an Iranian man, and Egyptians and Jordanians was very inspiring. I realized that we can do something wider and bigger, and not always to look at our personal story but see that the same story is happening everywhere. URI was a door to this perspective, and gave me this opportunity of being a doer.

### *What message do you have for other emerging women leaders in this field?*

**Rita:** Whatever the setback, just keep your eye on the goal: to repair the world. You aren't going to get to the big goal, but every victory, no matter how small, gets piled on the other victories and eventually will get to the goal. Everyone stands on someone else's shoulders. You aren't the first and you won't be the last, but you do have your own place.

**Anqa:** We should have tolerance within us and tolerate criticism of ourselves. And we should always believe that we can change this world.

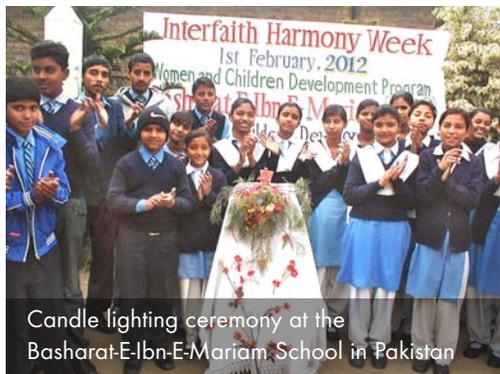
**Qutub:** I would like to quote Gandhiji: "My life is my message." Truth brings courage, so behold truth and march forward to achieve peace and justice. Your leadership skill has divine qualities and anything divine is always a blessing.

**Despina:** To appreciate life, others, and what you have, one step at a time; to work not because there are quick rewards, but to work towards having a strong satisfaction in serving others.



Despina Namwembe

## URI CCs CELEBRATE WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK



Candle lighting ceremony at the Basharat-E-Ibn-E-Mariam School in Pakistan

For complete descriptions and photos of URI WIHW events, visit the WIHW links at our web site, [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org). The URI WIHW Tool Card is also available for download.

From small villages to major urban centers, this year's global celebrations marking World Interfaith Harmony Week February 1-7, demonstrate that interfaith understanding, dialogue and cooperation are not only a hope, but a growing reality in the world today.

- At UN headquarters in New York, URI's UN representative and President of the Committee of Religious NGOs, Monica Willard, helped organize the official UN celebrations, bringing together nearly 1,200 UN delegates, faith leaders, students, and NGO representatives, including URI's Associate Executive Director Debra Bernstein. Opening the event, UN General Assembly President Mr. Nassir Abduaziz Al-Nasser called upon world religions and civil society to work together for greater peace and understanding.
- In Mumbai and Gujarat, India, eight CCs distributed URI Charters and participated in commemorations honoring those killed in inter-religious violence 10 years ago. And in URI South India/Sri Lanka, an entire week of activities at Karickam International School highlighted the importance that WIHW celebrations have assumed in local festival traditions.
- In Pakistan, URI events brought together hundreds of diverse groups of people in Lahore, Sargodha, Faisalabad, and Sialkot. In the Khanewal region, over 150 participants heard speakers and musicians from different faiths call for greater appreciation of diversity among their shared cultures and ethnicities. And the Pakistan Council for Social Welfare & Human Rights CC conducted an interfaith orientation workshop for hundreds of women and men from Hindu, Muslim, Christian and other faiths.
- On the African continent, CCs in Kenya and Uganda brought together religious and interfaith leaders for prayers, discussions and exchange visits between local faith groups, courageous and important actions in areas that have recently seen increased interreligious violence and terrorist activity.
- In the Middle East, CC members in Jordan held a moving candlelight ceremony on the morning of February 1st, shared by groups around the world. In Israel, URI CC members and friends celebrated a decade of Christian, Druze, Jewish and Muslim women working together.
- Across Europe, CCs in London, Helsinki, and Sofia (Bulgaria) organized interfaith symposia that included key religious leaders, government officials, academics and lay people.
- In Los Angeles, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute CC marked the week with a commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the death of journalist Daniel Pearl. A peace concert in North Carolina rounded out the week in the U.S.

This is the second year that World Faith Interfaith Harmony week has been celebrated around the world.

## URI'S GROWING NETWORK

Six new Cooperation Circles have joined URI since January 11, 2012 bringing our total to 534 grassroots interfaith groups in 79 countries.

<b>ECUADOR</b>	SAMAY
<b>MULTI-REGION</b>	Environmental Satellite Faiths Without Borders
<b>SOUTH SUDAN</b>	Coalition of Civil Society Organizations of South Sudan
<b>UNITED STATES</b>	Protecting and Restoring the Sacred Westside Interfaith Council for a Parliament of World's Religions

## new cooperation circle spotlight

### A SEED OF PEACE FOR A NEW NATION

There are few places in the world where the work of URI is needed more than South Sudan, where in the six months since its independence from Sudan was greeted with national jubilation, latent ethnic rivalries have resurfaced in a wave of violence that has killed thousands and displaced thousands more.

Last fall, shortly after the independence vote, URI-Africa Director Mussie Hailu visited the capital city, Juba, to introduce URI to religious, political and civil society leaders and, with the support of Juba's mayor, initiate a peace council to build trust among different ethnic and religious groups.

URI welcomed the first Cooperation Circle from the new country, the Coalition of Civil Society Organizations of South Sudan, in December 2011. The group, a coalition of 45 civil society organizations working in peacebuilding, climate change, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, social development, good government, human rights and more, vows to "contribute to the development of our new country through peace building and promoting social harmony given the tribal and religions diversity in South Sudan."

May peace prevail in South Sudan!

For more on these and other stories from the URI network, contact Tripp Mikich, URI News Desk at [newsdesk@uri.org](mailto:newsdesk@uri.org)