Santa Clara High School is a public school located in Santa Clara County, California. It was established in 1872 and serves nearly 1900 students in grades 9-12.

COMMENTS

"Having the opportunity to expose my students to actual practitioners of these religions was excellent and I know the impact on students will be long-lasting."

"It is truly inspirational to myself as a teacher that there are others out there who also highly value educating the public and encouraging youth to respect the array of belief systems, ideas, opinions, and traditions that exist."

At the beginning of the Fall semester, Santa Clara High School students were offered a unique opportunity to meet and engage in an interfaith dialogue with representatives of four major world religions. Although located less than five miles away, this was ING’s first visit to this school.

World Religions teacher, Emily Burton learned about ING from a brochure and requested an interfaith panel for her class and another social science teacher’s course. She learned that ING is an educational outreach organization that provides certified guest speakers from various professional backgrounds to supplement social sciences curriculum in schools and to promote religious literacy and mutual respect among people of all faiths and none. ING has served the community at large for nearly 17 years, including academic institutions from middle schools and high schools to universities.

As sixty students gathered into the study room of the library, a sense of anticipation for what was to come in the next 90 minutes became evident. This was the first panel of its kind for Santa Clara High students and an integral part of their studies. The panelists each began by giving a brief synopsis of their faith, starting with Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Berget Jelane, representing the Buddhist religion, began by explaining how she happened to...
come across Buddhism during mid-life without much prior understanding of the religion. Berget, who is a family therapist and an educator, practices the Theravada Buddhism tradition and participates in several interfaith organizations.

Berget’s pleasant and relaxed attitude set a personable tone, allowing students to feel at ease with the speakers throughout the panel. She explained the fundamental “arms” of Buddhism, compassion and wisdom, which initiate the basic guidelines to the ethical principles of the religion. Concepts of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold path to the end of suffering were also covered. Berget mentioned that there is a multitude of different faiths practicing Buddhist meditation today as a means of attaining mindfulness and tranquility.

Representing the Jewish religion was Karen Stiller, who described Judaism as a 4,000 year old faith, dating back to the Abrahamic era with the same ancient descendants as two of the other faiths present. She clarified misconceptions of Judaism as a religion versus an ethnicity, and emphasized cultural and religious differences of Jews in and outside of Israel.

Karen was particularly articulate in answering questions posed by the students, including those not related to her faith. This exemplified her breadth of knowledge of religious and socio-political relations between Judaism and the other participating religions, a key aspect of any interfaith discourse.

Dr. Aurea Lewis spoke about the Christian religion and the concepts of Christianity as a generational-type religion with underpinnings of Judaic history. Students were particularly interested in the historical practices of Christianity which have evolved over 2000 years and are still being observed today.

As with the other panelists, Aurea gave anecdotal input to her explanations, which helped students understand diversities within the same creed. One student commented that the panel “was very informative…unbiased and [that the speakers] are solely explaining what they believed and felt.” Explaining personal ideologies allowed speakers to give accounts of their own practices and customs, presenting themselves as individuals of a vast and multifarious group.

Maha ElGenaidi expressed that Islam is a primordial religion and it encompasses historical and religious backgrounds with the other Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Christianity. She also informed the students that there are currently 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. Added with the other three faiths, this totals nearly four-out-of-five of the world’s population.

Maha was eloquent in answering questions related to the Taliban, women’s rights, and the factor of culture within the Muslim world as a whole. She was able to use herself as an example when responding to queries, which gave students the opportunity to put a face on a typically misunderstood religion, while at the same time demystifying several stereotypes.

The panel proved to be quite impactful, as many SCHS students were fascinated by the comparisons between all four religions. "What I found interesting was how all the religions were similar [to each other] in one way or another. I also liked hearing about what it is like to be a follower of that particular religion and what their views are on certain topics. It was also pretty amazing to hear about different philosophies. I would love to attend future seminars which are similar to this," concluded one student.

**ING and the Interfaith Speakers Bureau**

ING is a non-profit, educational organization founded in 1993 that promotes religious literacy and mutual respect through on-site presentations and interfaith dialogues to academic institutions, community agencies, and other organizations. The Interfaith Speakers Bureau is an educational program that teaches about the world’s five major religions, traditions and cultures through onsite, interactive panels with certified speakers. High schools, colleges and universities are invited to host an interfaith panel for their students to enhance learning and teach critical thinking skills. For more information or to schedule a panel, visit [www.ing.org](http://www.ing.org)