

Community Leader: Dr. Qais Ghanem

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Dr. Qais Ghanem

In life, some people are spectators and some are actors. Dr. Qais Ghanem is an actor. After accumulating several lifetimes' worth of academic and professional achievements, Dr. Ghanem has dedicated the last five years to tirelessly promoting the integration of new Canadians into Canada's larger society.

Dr. Ghanem is a human rights activist, a world-recognized physician, a professor, a broadcaster, a poet, a novelist, and, most importantly, a vocal advocate for multiculturalism. Through his countless voluntary initiatives, Dr. Ghanem has succeeded in opening communication among people of different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, particularly those who might not otherwise have had a safe forum in which to explore not just their differences but their similarities.

Qais Ghanem, himself an immigrant and a proud Canadian, firmly believes that the successful integration of new Canadians hinges upon opening up communication among all members of Canadian society – from those whose histories pre-date Confederation to those who arrived in Canada yesterday; he believes that “hearing the other” results in “understanding the other”. It is his belief that Canada's multiculturalism policy of “unity in diversity” is an important keystone to Canada's strength as a nation. Born into a Muslim family in Yemen, Dr. Ghanem had a front-row seat in an arena that has seen social and political devastation result from an unwillingness to listen to “the other's” needs. Dr. Ghanem asserts that “an enemy is someone whose story you have not heard yet....and once you have heard his story, he is no longer your enemy.” He believes very strongly in the equality of people irrespective of origin or education or income. He has always recognized that people want to be respected, want to be heard and want to contribute to society. Dr. Ghanem has achieved success in many multicultural and multi-faith community activities:

1. The founder of CHIN radio's award-winning show called "Dialogue with Diversity" which profiles the lives of new Canadians and gives a voice to members of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities. To date, 87 nations have been profiled.
2. The co-founder of "Potlucks for Peace"; an Ottawa-based Jewish Arab dialogue group that is built on the premise that out of the willingness to engage in dialogue, solutions can arise. He is also a supporter of "Independent Jewish Voices" a progressive group that promotes justice, ethics and humanity in Israel and Palestine.
3. The creator of the popular website, also called "Dialogue with Diversity", which builds bridges and develops dialogue among the ethnic and religious groups that form the Canadian mosaic.
4. The founder of the "Mixed Couples" social group; where 60 couples of different race or religion, and their children, attend dinners at restaurants or enjoy summer BBQs, thus celebrating multicultural and multi-faith understanding.
5. Moderator and coordinator, in cooperation with the Canadian Institute of Conflict Resolution, of Ottawa's Peace Festival forum on religion, where 8-9 panelists discussed their religious affiliations and the ways in which interfaith understanding promotes peace. (2009 - 2010)
6. Founder of "Dialogue for Democracy", an open-forum, monthly gathering of individuals who wish to discuss issues that impact the lives of all Canadians, and where all attendees get equal time to express opinions.

For his tireless voluntary work, Dr. Ghanem has received several important awards:

1. 2010: The Canadian Ethnic Media Award (CEMA) – Radio Category – for the broadcast called "Five Races in a Family of Four"
2. 2010: The United Way/Centraide Ottawa Community Builder Award
3. 2010: The Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) Media Leadership Award
4. 2009: The Canadian Ethnic Media Award (CEMA) – Radio Category – for the broadcast called "Three Female Friends: a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim"

In his professional life, Dr. Ghanem is a practicing medical doctor with an MD from the University of Edinburgh. He finished his specialty training in Neurology. In 2004 he was elected president of the Canadian Society of Clinical Neurophysiologists (CSCN) where he served for three years. He retired last month as associate professor of medicine at the University of Ottawa and Director of the Sleep Laboratory at the Montfort Hospital. He has published more than 20 scientific articles.

As a result of his radio show, "Dialogue with Diversity", which he launched in 2006, Dr. Ghanem has created a much-needed forum for Canadians of diverse backgrounds to speak to the issues about which they care most: integration, employment, credential recognition, racism, intergenerational matters, settlement issues, education, participation in Canadian society, cultural/ethnic/religious identity, personal and professional achievements, to name just a few. Through his radio show, Dr. Ghanem promotes awareness and understanding between not just long-standing and new Canadians, but between discrete ethnic and religious groups, thus eliminating ignorance one-of-the-other, fear, suspicion and racism. Perhaps most importantly, his show gives a voice to those who might not otherwise be heard. He has featured about 200 different nations and groups on his radio show, including the Ottawa magazine Vision Latina.

For many years, Dr. Ghanem has been a leader in promoting human rights, justice, international cooperation and peace, and has taken a special interest in promoting diversity and multiculturalism and how such knowledge helps to combat racism. Dr. Ghanem is quite familiar with utilizing media and internet technologies to spread important messages to the public. His interest in breaking down barriers between different groups led him to start his very popular website www.dialoguewithdiversity.com, which builds bridges and develops dialogue among ethnic and religious groups. In addition to being a repository of his radio interviews, it provides articles on issues related to cultural, ethnic and interfaith matters; offers a platform where interested parties can share thoughts and ideas; and provides a bulletin board on which up-coming community events can be posted: cultural, ethnic, and religious events; meetings, seminars and discussion groups; festivals and celebrations; and fund raisers.

Dr. Ghanem's extremely popular – and growing – “Mixed Couples” group is unique in Canada. It reflects the growing trend in Canada of inter-faith, inter-ethnic coupling. The idea emerged from his observations during his radio show “Dialogue with Diversity.” He was struck by the large proportion of guests who were married or committed couples from different racial and religious backgrounds. In fact when he did the radio show on Yemen, he interviewed two male Yemenis, one married to a woman from the Czech Republic, the other to one from Haiti. There was also a female Yemeni guest, married to an Italian man. He himself is a Yemeni, married to a British woman. He recalls how all four Yemenis in the studio were married to spouses from very different backgrounds – quite happily, one might add. Later he interviewed a man who is the child of a Czech Catholic mother and an Indian Hindu father. His wife, who came to the same radio interview, is Jewish. During the interview he discovered that they had adopted two daughters, one Mayan, the other Inuit. The story of that unique family was the reason for the second CEMA award received by Dr Ghanem, in 2010. After that interview, Dr Ghanem and his guests started forming the new group called “Mixed Couples” in 2009. It began with four people and has since grown to seventy. The group encourages the children in these unions to attend these dinners and barbeques, in order to make sure that they develop pride in their mixed ancestry. In 2006 Dr. Ghanem came up with the very novel idea of creating, hosting and financing a new radio show on CHIN Radio Ottawa which he named “Dialogue with Diversity”. Each week, he interviews people from a different country about its geography, history, ethnic and religious mix, customs, values, food, celebrations, and music.

Dr. Ghanem nearly always ends the show with a question about integration, which asks guests what they feel is the best option for settling in Canada: integration, assimilation, or simply being left alone. Almost unanimously (less one guest), his interviewees have said that they should integrate as fully as possible, while maintaining their religion, passing their mother tongue to their children and keeping the positive parts of their cultures.

Over the past five years, “Dialogue with Diversity” has profiled many nations, in addition to hosting shows on “Black History Month”, the “Turkish Festival”, “Integration of Muslims”, “Hijab”, violence against women, rape crisis centers, etc. Here are some of the theme shows that Dr. Ghanem has organized and hosted:

- Immigrant Integration Issues
- Helping New Immigrants Find the Jobs they Deserve (2 parts)
- The Plight of the International Medical Graduate (4 parts)
- Interview about the Magazine: *Vision Latina*
- Mental Health Problems of New Immigrants

- Dialogue with Three Female Friends: A Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim (CEMA Award Winner, 2009)
- Five Races in a Family of Four (CEMA Award Winner, 2010)
- Miss Latina Winner, Ottawa
- Achievements of Immigrant Women
- National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada
- Immigrant Women Services Ottawa (IWSO)

Although he had published a book of poetry, both English and Arabic, under the title "From Left to Right", his first novel "FINAL FLIGHT FROM SANNA" (\$20 - BAICO publishers) was published at the beginning of this year, and is already selling well. It is a novel that addresses the absence of democracy and equality for women in the Middle East. It also predicted to a large extent the events currently taking place in his country of origin, Yemen. The novel is to be found at OCTOPUS Books, 116 Third Avenue.