

## Editorial

Another year has gone and we wonder in amazement at how quickly the year has passed by. Many great new initiatives were also accomplished this year.

One of our major highlights for 2011 was to celebrate Affinity's 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary, followed by a mesmerising cultural performance from the Whirling Dervishes. Affinity brought them out from Turkey, and what a better venue to hold it at then at the spectacular setting of the Sydney Town Hall, Sydney's premier concert hall built in the 1880's.

Reflecting on Affinity's 10 years of service, I remembered Affinity's purpose for existence. It was not only to create social harmony between the Muslim community and the many cultural and religious communities in NSW, but also to ease the Muslim integration process in Australia. I believe we have played a significant role in this process.

Another major milestone was to establish our first ever Advisory Board made up of leaders from different segments of society. Affinity is here for the long haul and we want to be here to do our best to create social harmony.

On another note, after 10 years of which the last 5 years I have served as the President of Affinity, I will be resigning as Affinity President at our next AGM meeting in February, 2012. I will still act as an adviser and support Affinity.

Finally, I wish you all a prosperous 2012 and hope it brings you joy and happiness.

**Mehmet Saral**  
**President**

## 10<sup>th</sup> Year Anniversary Reception

The Affinity 10th Year Anniversary reception marked a decade of community service in the area of inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue across Australia.

In attendance were Federal politicians in the likes of the Hon Philip Ruddock, State politicians such as the Hon Victor Dominello, Mr Charles Casuscelli, Mr Robert Furolo and the former Premier of NSW Hon Bob Carr. Affinity also hosted the Turkish & US Consulate General's along with prominent members from a diverse range of sectors from Councillors, Police, Media, Academics, Educators, Religious & Community leaders.



Mr Robert Furolo the Shadow Minister for Citizenship & Communities; Shadow Minister for Roads and Ports from the NSW Labor Party provided the Welcoming Address. He commented on the important role Affinity has been playing in society by saying *"...(Affinity) recognises the responsibility they have in playing a part in the partnership (with the government of the day) to promote tolerance, to promote dialogue and understanding amongst all faiths and communities in society"*.







The Turkish Consulate General, Ms Gulseren Celik provided the first floor reflection. She talked about her association with Affinity since her appointment in Sydney by commenting on how *“(Affinity) has become one of the leading and most inspiring social organisations that make a credible contribution to intercultural dialogue in Australia. I’d like to extend my sincere congratulations to Affinity for their hard work and contribution to the multicultural structure in Australia and for their success on reaching a decade of service”*.



Mr Robin Margo SC, former President of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies commented about the resilient relationship he has had with Affinity, when he was the President. He said *“...most importantly and valuable of all however, has been the respect, understanding and acceptance that has grown from the activities of Affinity. It enables people of different faiths and cultures to maintain strong community and personal relationships here in Australia. Especially in the more challenging times when there’s conflict and dispute overseas. We wish our friends in Affinity many more years of fruitful activity”*.

Mr Jim Mein, former Moderator of the Uniting Church Synod of NSW and now the Director of the Schools Ministry (Uniting Church Board of Education) talked about his personal association with Affinity by saying



*“I very much liken the contribution of Affinity to Australian society over the last 10 years as an unbelievable and enriching journey that should never finish. There’s an expression that ‘life is a journey and not a destination’. Affinity has been a part of my journey....There’d be many things the Uniting Church would have been involved with Affinity from the school (programs), iftar dinners and (as it would be) with so many other occasions, it’s all to achieve a harmonious society....Thank you Affinity”*.



Dr Stepan Kerkyasharian, Chairperson of the NSW Community Relations Commission (NSW CRC) was praiseworthy of Affinity’s efforts to breakdown misconceptions with the Iftar dinners. He said *“The foundation was responsible for the genesis of the iftar dinner*



*being held in the Parliament of NSW, being hosted by the Premier (Hon Bob Carr). An initiative, which sent a powerful uniting message to the whole Australian community. Iftar dinners are a norm around Australia with political, community and religious leaders coming together in a spirit of mutual respect for religious beliefs and underlying acceptance....Affinity is congratulated by the CRC for 10 years of service to the Australian community”.*



Mr Khaled Sukkarieh, President of the Islamic Council of NSW expressed his appreciation for the tireless work of its members and offered the following words *“Congratulations on such a great effort. I’m sure this is only the beginning of many years to come, years of building bridges amongst communities to remove bigotry and ignorance”.*



Dr Trish Madigan from the Broken Bay Catholic Diocese could boast on her long term association with the founding members of Affinity, before its incorporation. She remarked *“It’s a privilege to go back a lot*

*further than most people here. My association with the founders of Affinity goes back 14 years, well before it was incorporated as a foundation. I remember the first Christian – Muslim relations in 1997....after the first encounter, there have been many reciprocated visits and tonight we’re seeing the fruits of that relationship. I have also done some research in northern Iraq, where I saw the initiatives of the Gulen movement. Their work is truly remarkable..... The highlight for me has been the women activities such as the dinners, gatherings and interaction with many Muslim ladies....being able to hear their perspectives. I look forward to many more years of fruitful engagement here in Australia”.*



Mr Peter Manning, former Producer of current affairs programs like Four Corners, Adjunct Lecturer, Writer, and Commentator summed up Affinity’s contribution to society with one word – ‘Democracy’. He said *“My congratulations to Affinity is for being the leading organisation in the last 10 years to keep society together in Sydney, when it could have come apart. It’s a very big statement to make but I truly think it’s true....some people are includers, some people are excluders.....happily, luckily for Australia and Sydney’s society, Affinity has been an includer. It has put its arms out to everyone in society. I take my hat off to all of the men and women of Affinity who have done so much for Australian society”.*

Ms Helen Clarke, Head of Department for Christian Studies and Social Justice (Knox Grammar School) talked about her partnership with Affinity in educating her students and fellow teachers across NSW in the Studies of Religion Conference.



She talked about her co-incidental meeting with Affinity by stating *"I almost found Affinity by accident. I say this cautiously because I've been on a personal search since 2001, (thinking) there must be some way of connecting with this community that's been so badly represented. There's some truth and justice that's needed to be served. That's where I met Mehmet. I have since had a strong connection with Affinity.....I have also had the privilege of attending a Tour of Turkey. Although we knew a lot about the work of Affinity, it wasn't until we went to Turkey to see what the Gulen movement had done that had filled our heart with a deeper connection, that made Affinity an important part of our lives....I think we share a great vision, a great hope with the people of Affinity and in their work, their inspiring intellect, their warmth and openness and now 10 years on, you're a wonderful organisation. Every one of you needs to be congratulated"*.

Mr Mehmet Ozalp, one of the co-founders of Affinity and now President of Islamic Sciences and Research Academy (ISRA) commented on his great pride in how Affinity has come a long way since its inception. He reflected on the past decade by saying



*"It makes me personally happy to have been a part of something important like Affinity"*.

Mr Mehmet Saral, Co-founder and President talked about the importance of interfaith and intercultural dialogue and how Affinity have been inspired by contemporary Muslim scholar Fethullah Gulen. He said, *"We have come a long way since our inception in 2001, well before 9/11. This shows we are a pro-active organisation, not re-active. At Affinity, our motto is to embrace and love humanity with the value and dignity it deserves."* He then went on to say, *"... as inspired by his eminence Fethullah Gulen, Affinity executive members feel passionate about serving humanity, they feel passionate about showing the true colours of their faith and most of all they want to win the pleasure of God as humans are the seeds and fruits of the universe."*



The NSW Minister for Citizenship and Communities, and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs the Hon Victor Dominello was the award presenter for the night.

He presented each of the current Affinity





members a plate for their tireless work in serving society.

Most of the Affinity members are young volunteers from diverse backgrounds who dedicate time outside of their business hours to help pursue the message of love, mutual respect, understanding, acceptance and appreciation.

The Minister reflected on this during his speech when he said *"NSW is one of the most multicultural states in the world.....We have over 200 cultural groups in NSW.....We need community leadership to keep those groups together. Affinity, after 10 years of service has established itself as a community leader. True leadership is the capacity to build bridges so we could generate a common goal.....the more bridges you build the greater leadership. As Affinity grows from year to year, we find its leadership going from strength to strength. The common goal is to bring people together through an affinity and respect, which is absolutely critical for a culturally diverse state like NSW. Thank you for your 10 years of hard work"*.



At the conclusion of the speeches, the guests mingled with each other before making their way to the main hall to witness the mystical Whirling Dervishes concert.

## **Whirling Dervishes LIVE at the Sydney Town Hall**

Stepping through the doorway into the Centennial Hall of Sydney's Town Hall for the first time can be an overwhelming experience. For one, the main hall houses the world's biggest pipe organ. Filling an entire wall of one side of the massive hall, the organ is an imposing sight. To have to then sit through an ancient ritual passed down since the 13th century, the cumulative feeling that cut a line through the beginning to the end of my evening was one of awe.

After a first act and an interlude, the Whirling Dervishes concert began with a beautiful poetry recitation, in the original Farsi, by Affinity executive member Mr Bilal Waheed from an extract of one of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī-Rūmī's (known as Rumi in the west) poems.

The extract, which posed existential questions such as, "Why was I created?" served as the thematic pivot for the concert as a whole. The audience then applauded as the participants of the main event of the evening took to the stage. The Sema ritual (or ceremony) of the Whirling Dervishes was about to commence.



As each of the eighteen semazens entered, their black cloaks (hirkas, symbolising the grave) and tall light brown hats (kûlah or

sikke, symbolising the tombstone) created an imposing effect that drowned out the applause from the audience. It was hard to ignore the fact that these men were dressed in over seven centuries of tradition, that they carried on their backs and in their hearts seven centuries of gravitas. It is an image I am not likely to forget.

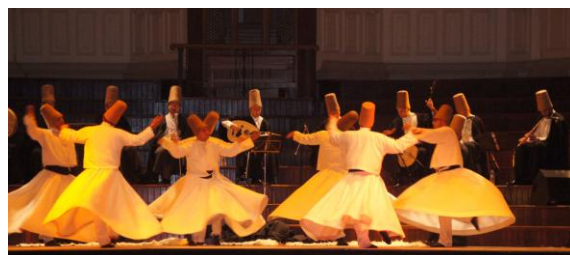
Ten of the semazens sat down to play music – this is a musical ceremony, after all – on an elevated platform, while those that remained sat in a praying position, their hands on their laps and their heads cocked to a side, as the sheikh among the group initiates the first of four parts of the ceremony: the Naat and Taksim.

The next part, the Devr-i Veled, begins as the semazens (the ones not playing instruments) stand up to form a line for a circular procession that requires each to bow, one by one and in turn, to the performer behind him. The procession rotates slowly in a circle, the rotation depending entirely on each semazen's disciplined timing of bows and forward steps. The circle eventually breaks and widens into a horseshoe, still maintaining the movement. The semazens stand in a new line, heads cocked once again. The second part ends when the semazens, except for the postnishin (semazen leader), remove their hirkas to reveal the brilliant white gowns underneath.



Thus begins the third part, the Four Salams. Each semazen crosses his arms on his chest,

turns to his right, and moves into the actual whirling from which the concert derives its name. Six of them form an outer circle, one stands in the middle and as they all spin on their right foot, the postnishin, in what appears to be an instructive style, negotiates himself between each semazen. The semazens whirl with their arms outstretched and askew, their right palms facing the sky (heaven), left palms facing the ground (the earth, perhaps symbolising humility). They whirl with the unbroken grace of a ballerina in a music box.



It is a performance that demands utmost physical endurance and fealty to precision. The whirling dervishes move into a circle, stop; begin, move into a circle, stop again; it is a pattern repeated a few times in the Four Salams before it ends. The final part of the Sema ritual is the concluding prayer, where the semazens return to their original seated positions, dressed in their hirkas as before, the cycle complete.

The Four Salams essentially fall under what Arnold van Gennep described in his 1909 book *Rites de Passage* as the liminal stage of rituals. Liminality is a concept invented by Gennep, and expanded upon by Victor Turner in the 1960s, which explores the transformational phase between two states of individuals, groups, communities, societies and even whole civilisations. For individuals, the liminal stage can exist between the shifts one makes from a non-spiritual outlook on life to a spiritual one.

For the Sema ritual, it is the Four Salams, the seemingly chaotic (but in actuality disciplined and precise) movement between the other

three parts which, when taken together, represent the spiritual journey of a believer. The whirling in the Four Salams is the search for truth; the spectacle of it and the emphasis on it shows that the most essential component of a spiritual journey is the search itself.



It is appropriate, then, for Affinity to host a performance of the Whirling Dervishes in Sydney. Their mission statement, "To create and sustain enduring affinity and relationships with people through intercultural and interfaith dialogue and understanding," is a social manifestation of the Mevlevi Sema ritual.

As many of the speakers at the organisation's 10th Year Anniversary Reception before the concert had stated, the purpose of Affinity is to dispel pervading ideas of Islam and to integrate Muslims into Australian society by working from both sides – the Islamic community and the wider Australian public. More broadly, it is a search for a communal spirituality that bridges the gaps that necessarily exist in a diverse society as ours.



In his speech at the reception, the President of the organisation, Mehmet Saral said he believes that the next generation will complete Affinity's project. It is both a realistic and optimistic hope, but one which tacitly acknowledges that there is yet work to be done. Just as the Whirling Dervishes' performance of the Four Salams is the liminal phase of the Sema ceremony, so is Affinity in its liminal state, building towards the realisation of its mission statement.

*(Written by an anonymous spectator)*

## **Affinity visits St Patrick's Cathedral for Neighbourhood Day**

On Sunday, 11<sup>th</sup> of December, the Affinity Sydney team visited Parramatta St Patrick's Catholic Cathedral as part of its annual neighbourhood day activities during the week of the Muslim festivity known as *Ashura*. After Mass, Affinity hosted the congregation for a sweet dish known as Noah's Pudding (*Ashura*).

Sharing Noah's pudding is a symbolic representation of the unity and essential relationship of humans to one another and to their Creator.

Preparing Noah's pudding is a common practice among Muslim and Christian people around the Mediterranean. People prepare the pudding at home and send a bowl to each of the neighbours in their neighbourhood. As tradition goes, the residents of forty houses to your east, west, north and south are considered neighbours. One has the responsibility of maintaining good relations with their neighbours regardless of what their religion or beliefs may be.

Altogether 250 dishes of Noah's pudding was served to the congregation. Marion from the Cathedral said, "I thank you and your colleagues for giving us the chance to be part of your *Ashura* 'celebration'.





## **Affinity hosts Neighbourhood Day with Noah's pudding and BBQ in the Gong**

On the same Sunday morning, the Wollongong Affinity team in conjunction with St Brigid's Parish school in Gwynneville, kindly hosted Neighbourhood Day.

The event appropriately titled 'Noah's Pudding Neighbourhood and Friendship day' attracted over 150 people from a variety of backgrounds and faiths from the area, including the Wollongong Lord Mayor, Gordon Bradbury.

The day started with morning tea, and a variety of great homemade cakes. The welcome speech opened by Fr Bernard, was followed by Ms Janet Morrissey, explaining the importance of being close with your neighbours and breaking barriers between cultures. Affinity's Miss Ruveyda Ozturk translated the Quranic verses related to Prophet Noah read out by Mr Fatih Ozdemir. She also gave a brief explanation of the story and significance of Noah's Pudding. Finally a great performance was displayed by students from both St Brigid's Parish school and Sule College Shellharbour campus.

As one of the grass root activities of Affinity intercultural foundation, the "Noah's Pudding" celebrates the common heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and what better way to do it, but through a Neighbourhood and Friendship day and having the tastebud satisfying Noahs

pudding (Ashura) along with a good old Aussie BBQ.

St Brigid's Judith Hurley said it was a great opportunity for people to see old friends and extend the hand of friendship to others.

Affinity Wollongong would like to extend our thanks to St Brigid's Parish school for co-hosting this event, along with Edmund Rice and Catholic Diocese of Wollongong.

## **Hosting Japanese Delegation**

Late November, Affinity was fortunate enough to host a delegation from Japan. The delegation comprised the world renowned Prof. Sasaki Yoshiaki (Tokyo Foundation, Senior Researcher & Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Adviser, JP), Dr Masayuki Akutsu (University of Tokyo), Prof Idris Danismaz (Lecturer, Doshisha University – Kyoto) along with Mr Serkan Caglar (Horizon Japan International School) and Mr Mustafa Arslan (Baharu Education Corporation).

Their visit was unfortunately short but we managed to visit Prof Michael Lewis from the Dept of Japanese Studies, Sydney University who is an expert on Social and cultural history, nineteenth and twentieth century Japan. Discussions were based around Sydney University's course program and the cultural exchange programs that are currently in place between Japanese and Australian education institutions. Prof Sasaki was pleasantly surprised at the maturity of the curriculum and subject areas.



During their visit to the Affinity Centre, Prof Sasaki valued the contribution of Affinity in generating social harmony within society and felt it was necessary for people of all walks of all life to have an open mind for information exchange. This would lead the way for people to respect, appreciate and learn from each other allowing us as individuals to take the leap further in our own personal development.

## Hosting Indonesian Delegation

Early December an academic delegation from the State Islamic University of Jakarta, Indonesia visited Affinity Intercultural Foundation. The group consisted of Prof. Dr. Suwito (Deputy Director of School of Postgraduate), Dr. Yusuf Rahman (Deputy Director of School of Postgraduate), Dr. Nurlena (Deputy Dean of Faculty of Tarbiya), Dr. Abdul Wahid Hasyim (Dean of Faculty of Adab and Humanitarian) & Dr. Ali Unsal (Director of Fethullah Gulen Chair).

Upon their visit to Affinity, they were pleasantly surprised to hear of the good work Affinity has done to date. In particular, the outreach within society through the iftar programs and the conferences was a notable aspect of Affinity's work. Dr Hasyim mentioned that intercultural exchange in a country like Australia is a necessity considering its diversity. He added there's a richness that could be obtained from information exchange and learning more about each other's frame of reference.

Dr Nurlena also stated that Indonesia could learn a lot from the co-operation that Affinity has made with its partners and apply it to the local scene, irrespective of the organisation's cultural diversity. Dr Suwito was most impressed with the youthful look of Affinity and how their members are predominantly volunteers. He said it was good to tap into a young generation and find a value proposition for them to connect to and get them actively



involved. Dr Yusuf mentioned how some of the hosting programs Affinity organises, in particular the hosting of Indonesian youths was a great way for people back home to be exposed to a more dynamic and vibrant society such as Sydney. He believes this experience will benefit each of them greatly upon their return to Indonesia immensely.

Overall Affinity has hosted 4 delegations from Indonesia this year and looks forward to continuing the dialogue with our nearest Muslim populated neighbour.

## Affinity visits CSU Campus

Mehmet Saral and Ahmet Keskin along with Islamic Sciences & Research Academy (ISRA) executives flew to Wagga Wagga to renew the agreement between Charles Sturt University (CSU) and Affinity for Islamic Studies conducted at CSU.

During the meeting a number of changes were requested by Mr Mehmet Saral, of which one was that the renewal of the agreement should be signed between ISRA and CSU and that Affinity can pull out of this three-way relationship.

## Affinity nominated at the NSW CRC Marketing Awards

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of November, Mr Mehmet Saral and Mr Ahmet Keskin, attended the NSW Community Relations Commissions National Marketing Awards for 2011 at The Westin Hotel.

The event was attended by over 300 guests.

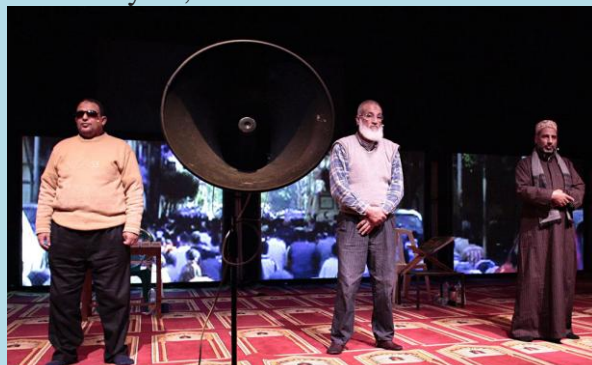
Amongst the 8 or so award categories, Affinity was nominated for the Community Award.

## **Affinity visits Sydney Festival 2012 Launch**

Mr Ahmet Keskin attended the Sydney Festival 2012 launch which was officially opened by the Premier of NSW The Hon Barry O'Farrell. Amongst the guest dignitaries who assisted in launching the Festival were the Minister for the Arts, Hon George Souris and Sydney City Mayor Clover Moore.

The attendees were from a broad cross section of society but the people from the arts and media industry were probably the most prominent. This year the festival looks like it will be held over 2 venues being the Sydney city area and Parramatta.

One short film that was of interest was Radio Muezzin, which is a documentary theatre work that explores the changing role of muezzins – the men who call the city to prayer from the thousands of mosques across Egypt. Four Egyptian muezzins from mosques in Cairo recount the rituals and practices that have given them such a distinct sense of purpose and spiritual identity. The muezzins share their stories, their fervour and their differences in this multimedia insight into the complexities of contemporary Egypt. This will be screened at the Seymour Centre on January 16, 18-21.



For more information please refer to <http://www.sydneyfestival.org.au/2012/Theatre/Radio-Muezzin/>

Ahmet thanked the organisers for inviting him and wished them well with the festival.