



© Days For Girls

## Ethics and Spirituality

Reflections and Contemplations on Life and Living

# Breaking Down Borders

An unlikely group comes together to reach across the world to provide help to young women.

by Elana Zaiman

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In March 2016, my friend Ellen (we call her “The Connector”) introduced me to her friend, LueRachelle, and to the work of the Saturday Sewing Sisters. This group of women from the Sarah Allen Sisterhood of the Women’s Ministry of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Seattle gather one Saturday each month to sew washable feminine hygiene kits (based on the Days for Girls template) for girls in Limbe, Cameroon, one of Seattle’s sister cities.

These kits, I learned, enable girls to go to school during their periods so that they don’t fall behind their male classmates, don’t burden their families with the cost of disposable feminine hygiene products, and don’t feel compelled to offer sexual favors to men in their village to be able to afford to purchase these products on their own.

I also learned that some of the women from the Saturday Sewing Sisters travel to Cameroon to hand these girls their individual kits (each kit lasts three years) and to educate them about their periods, reproduction, self-esteem and self-image.

Hearing about this project, I was immediately hooked. I asked myself why and was surprised by the many reasons this resonated so deeply:

... because as a woman, I want all girls to have access to feminine hygiene.

... because as a Jew, my values inform how I show up, not only in the Jewish world, but in the world at large.

... because education, human dignity and self-esteem are high up there on my values list.

... because as a citizen of this country, I am appalled by the hate crimes against African Americans, and in 2016, I sensed that hate crimes were on the rise, and I am not about hate.

... because as a rabbi, I believe in doing something in the world that transcends race and religion and brings people in faith communities and in neighborhood communities together.

For me, this project was a calling to show up in the world in a new way; to expand my sense of community; to increase my understanding of and connections with people I do not have the opportunity to interact with in my work as a rabbi in the Jewish community.

Don’t get me wrong — I believe we all need our own communities for a sense of identity, cohesion and belonging, but for me, in 2016, this was not enough. I needed something more, and I sensed that reaching outward to create a more expansive community would be a way for me to reach more deeply inward.

The only question was how to get involved. Saturday is my Sabbath; joining the Saturday Sewing Sisters was not an option, so I asked LueRachelle if she’d be open to having an additional Sewing Sisters site. I was clear in my ask that it was not just an additional site I was interested in creating, but that I was interested in our communities working together and getting to know one another. When I brought the idea to the rabbi at my synagogue, she was enthusiastic.

In June 2016, 13 women from the First AME Church came to our synagogue to speak about these kits and to demonstrate how they presented them to the girls in Cameroon. Two weeks later, our synagogue hosted its first sewing evening with the help of Claire and Jeanette, Saturday Sewing Circle regulars, who to this day, still guide us.

To that evening, I also invited women from the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Monroe, WA. Over

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time, I've invited neighbors, elementary, junior high and high school students. I even invited a group of trick-or-treaters who knocked on my door. I continue to invite people I meet at conferences, clergy gatherings and cafes.

The beauty of this project: It's hands-on. As we reach out to help girls on another continent, as we sew, cut patterns, snip threads, affix snaps, and thread ribbons to make drawstring bags, we share stories, build trust and create relationships. In fact, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community recently began a partner site at their mosque.

We have visited each other's congregations. We have worshipped together, and we will continue to develop programs to grow in our understanding of one another. We also have a new name: the Seattle Limbe Sewing Circle, to be inclusive of the different days on which we meet and of the men and boys who join us.

My soul is growing, and it's not just mine alone. Our African American, Muslim, Asian, Jewish, agnostic and atheist souls are growing together. While it's true that our differences — religion, skin color, yarmulkes and hijabs — could be a deterrent, they are not. Creating this more expansive

community has helped to diminish the distance between us and to celebrate our differences and similarities in ways that unite us, and we need that now.

In the words of Martin Luther King, "Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not-too-distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood [and sisterhood]\* will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty." Amen to that. ♦

\*Asterisk is my addition.

**Days for Girls** was founded in 2008 by current CEO Celeste Mergens. Celeste was working to meet the basic needs for an orphanage outside Nairobi, a massive challenge due to post-election violence that caused the population of the orphanage to swell. Celeste realized that girls in the orphanage were sitting on cardboard for days each month, missing school, and staying alone in their rooms because they lacked access to hygiene products. This was the impetus

for creating the first DfG Kits. Since that time, the Kit has been through 28 different iterations, each informed by feedback from women and girls across the world. Kits have reached more than 640,000 women and girls in over 100 countries.

Visit [www.daysforgirls.org](http://www.daysforgirls.org) to learn more about the DfG sewing circles and how you can get involved.



**BRAIN GAMES ANSWERS / From Page 18**

**Answers to Crossword Puzzle**

ONE	SAMBA	SPAT
DEAF	ALIAS	ARES
ONTO	FINDS	SORE
RESPL	ENDENT	TAT
ESE	RIOTS	
BASES	ABSENTEE	
OMAN	LIMITS	BY
ADIT	EVITA	OPEC
L	LISTENER	REDD
ESPRESSO	ENSUE	
MEE	LEG	
BRA	PUSHING	THEM
LANE	SHEER	SILLO
EPEE	FORGO	PROS
MERE	LOREN	TNT

**Answers to Sudoku**

9	6	3	5	2	1	8	4	7
2	7	8	4	6	9	5	1	3
1	4	5	8	7	3	6	2	9
8	1	6	2	9	7	3	5	4
3	9	4	6	1	5	7	8	2
5	2	7	3	8	4	9	6	1
6	8	9	7	4	2	1	3	5
4	3	1	9	5	6	2	7	8
7	5	2	1	3	8	4	9	6



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