

Anne Bocchini Pack  
Parkville, MD 21234

annebpack@gmail.com  
(410) 994-6136

### **HB0661- General Provisions - Commemorative Months - Muslim American Heritage and Jewish American Heritage Months - FAV**

My husband, Gordon Pack, and I are 2025-26 Civic and Nonprofit Fellows at the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies (ICJS). He is Muslim and I am Christian and we have an almost 2 year old son who we have chosen to raise in both faiths with respect for all. We are colleagues in parole and reentry, where I note that people from all faiths come together to improve conditions for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. While their beliefs and practices are different, they often cite them as a reason for doing the work. We applied for this fellowship together because both our personal and professional lives demanded it.

Gordon and I met at the ages of 58 and 42, and did not envision the possibility of a family. Our initial approach to our differences in faith was to ignore them. He went to the masjid on Friday, I went to church on Sunday. We practiced around each other, not with each other. We connected on issues of social justice and advocacy instead. It was not until we discovered I was pregnant that we made a meaningful effort to create a truly interfaith space, and once we did, I began to realize how little accurate information I had about Islam. Much of what I knew came from news articles, Hollywood movies and internet memes. Through my ICJS fellowship, I discovered how little I really knew about Judaism as well, with most of what I knew being from the Christian interpretation of the few pieces of the Hebrew texts that made it into the Christian Bible.

Were it not for my son, I would likely have persisted in being confidently incorrect about the faith of many of my friends, colleagues and neighbors, not because I didn't care to learn, but because I didn't realize how little I knew. And that would have been a terrible outcome, because as I have taken the time to learn to see the world through the eyes of others, I have also become a better leader, collaborator and mother. I did not just learn information about other faiths, I learned to engage in an interreligious space where individuals are confident and secure both in their beliefs and their ability to work side by side for the greater good. And that skill is applicable not just to religion, but to any differing belief system.

HB0661 creates an invitation and a platform for the Muslim and Jewish communities that collectively make up about 10% of Maryland's population to share their faith and practices. It is a call to the rest of us to pause in our often overwhelming lives to pay attention and learn something new from our neighbors instead of corporate and social media. In a time when the fabric of our democracy is being tested by division and polarization, and hostility is transmitted with the push of a button, SB0308 asks us to slow down and intentionally build the democratic, pluralistic society we believe in, face to face with other Marylanders. I urge a favorable report.