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SHAWN DOWD staff photographer

Dina Ghoneim, left, an American-born Egyptian-American student at Rochester Institute of Technology, shares a laugh with Allison Grodin, a Jewish student at the University of Rochester.

Mayor builds bridge to Islam

■ Johnson establishes teams to explore area religious diversity.

BY STAFF WRITER

DOUG MANDELARO

A Jerusalem-born Muslim businessman will team with a Jewish woman.

A Muslim born in Turkey and an African-American Christian, both in banking, will likely find more important matters than money to talk about.

A Muslim teacher and a Hindu psychologist, both born in India, plan to share more than geography.

These Rochester-area people are among the unique pairings of relative strangers sent by Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. on a timely journey of discovery Tuesday night.

The aim: promote

through these unusual pairings better understanding among those who take part and spread the goodwill into the larger community.

For the next year, the partners will meet regularly.

About 30 volunteers joined the Islamic Partnership Program sponsored by the mayor. They attended a kick-off meeting at the Islamic Center.

"The idea is to see if we can break down the walls that have been built," said Mesut Vardar, president of the Turkish Society of Rochester and a Muslim. He will be paired with David Leve, a Jewish-Universalist man who is a Nixon, Peabody lawyer.

"We'll try to concentrate a lot more on finding our similarities than our differences," Vardar said.

The commitment is a serious one, both time-wise and in the willingness to reveal thoughts and feelings about one's faith. Not only will the budding friends meet as pairs a recommended 16 times in the year, they will also meet with the larger group on occasion to compare notes, share successes and get help overcoming hurdles.

Don Soule, a Quaker who is president of the software company LPA, said he has a Muslim employee whom he has not gotten to know as well as he would like. This was an opportunity to learn more about Islam and Muslims, he said. "It will take me down a path I might not have gone down other-

wise," he said of his pairing with Nadir Abdullah, a Muslim born in Jerusalem.

Johnson spoke of the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, tragedy and the need to heal and clear away any misunderstandings. The group, he said, was on "a very, very significant journey... you will find you are doing something that will make a substantial difference in the quality of life of the community."

Dr. Muhammad Shafiq, spiritual leader at the Islamic Center, said the program would help all of the area's 15,000 Muslims and their new friends.

"This is what our faith stands for — understanding between people and peace." □

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