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BRIDGE BUILDERS CHARLOTTE LAUNCHES FIRST OF FIVE GAMBRELL FOUNDATION-FUNDED PROJECTS TO STYMIE LOCAL COVID IMPACT

CHARLOTTE, North Carolina (July 21, 2020) – Bridge Builders Charlotte, a joint effort between Belk Chapel at Queens University and Chicago-based [Interfaith Youth Core](#), officially launched this week with a goal of boosting interfaith cooperation and understanding to promote social justice and educational equity across the Charlotte region.

Bridge Builders Charlotte aims to use campus-community partnerships to overcome social divides and make our community stronger – with a specific aim of strengthening the Charlotte community’s response to the COVID-19 crisis. Bridge Builders’ strategic leadership team includes partners from the Community Building Initiative, Duke Endowment, Foundation for the Carolinas, Mecklenburg Metropolitan Interfaith Network (MeckMIN) as well as area educators, philanthropists and leaders from local houses of worship.

Last week, Bridge Builders launched its first of five projects by providing interfaith learning boxes to [Freedom School Partners](#) (FSP), a nonprofit that works to prevent summer learning loss through a culturally diverse curriculum focusing on reading skills and comprehension. The boxes were created to help Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools students avoid the summer slump, especially in a year cut short by the coronavirus with more remote schooling on the horizon. The boxes will also be distributed through Wayfinders, a nonprofit that has had to retool its signature summer camp experience, and Refugee Support Services.

The interfaith learning box project was funded by a \$50,000 grant to Wingate University and UNC Charlotte, one of five individual grants supported by a \$250,000 contribution from the [Gambrell Foundation](#). Collectively, the Gambrell-funded projects will involve more than 10 faith communities, six area colleges and universities (Central Piedmont Community College, Davidson College, Johnson C. Smith University, Queens University, UNC Charlotte and Wingate University), and six nonprofit organizations.

Between July and October 2020, these selected initiatives will forge connections between Charlotte-area campuses, local nonprofit organizations and religiously diverse communities, leveraging Charlotte’s potential to expand opportunity for those who are most vulnerable as result of the coronavirus crisis.

“By showcasing the value of meaningful partnerships that bridge religious and social divides, Bridge Builders Charlotte hopes to raise awareness of the role faith-based efforts can play in civic spaces, whether in response to a pandemic or to systemic social ills such as racism and discrimination,” says Bridge Builders Charlotte Program Executive Dr. Suzanne Watts Henderson. “We hope these pilot projects will establish a

sustainable model for interfaith initiatives that strengthen Charlotte's social fabric by addressing real needs in the community. Along the way, students will gain real-life opportunities to develop interfaith leadership skills for their future professional lives."

Dr. Eboo Patel, Founder and President of IFYC, applauded the program's kickoff. "Charlotte's young people, civic leaders, and educators are bringing people together across lines of religious, race and philosophical difference," he said. "In doing so, they are demonstrating the best of who we can be in this challenging national moment."

Each interfaith learning box contains up to 10 activities based on grade, each corresponding to a different faith tradition and complete with an instruction card and educational packet. Examples include Tessellation, a geometric art custom rooted in Islamic tradition; Rangoli, a Hindu artform in which patterns are created on the floor in living rooms or courtyards using materials such as colored rice, dry flour, colored sand or flower petals; and nondenominational pan pipes.

FSP plans to distribute a box to each of its scholars as a supplement to their summer curriculum, which has been revised to adapt to the virtual learning environment. The nonprofit organization will encourage families to complete all activities together to help at-risk children continue learning and avoid a backwards slide even when out of school for the summer. Bridge Builders' student interns will also lead virtual conversations with interested families about the activities and the value of interfaith understanding.

While Bridge Builders Charlotte is currently funded only for the 2020 projects, an aspirational goal is to use this inaugural Charlotte experience to establish a model for campus-community partnerships that can be extended throughout the region and across the state of North Carolina.

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