

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.

I'm Onka Dekker.

Today, we play new music from British soprano Sarah Brightman that was inspired by her upcoming space trip.

We also learn how some Californians are working to build friendships between Jews and Muslims...

But first, we tell about some Americans who have found an interesting new way to help local businesses and the larger economy.

Cash Mobs

The American economy grew strongly in the first three months of this year. A big part of that growth came from the largest increase in consumer spending since the end of 2010.

Christopher Cruise tells us about one new activity that is helping smaller, local businesses get more of that consumer spending.

What do you get when you combine a store's need for more sales with people who live in the area and have money to spend?

A cash mob.

Sara Pierce is one of many people who have come to a local business to spend money and be a part of the mob.

"We're mobbing the business, so that's the cash mob."

The cash mob was organized through social media. It is like a flash mob, where large groups gather in a public area to dance. But instead of dancing, people in cash mobs are spending.

We went to a cash mob planned by a group called Think Local First DC. It works to help the economy in Washington, D.C., grow. Stacey Price is the group's executive director.

"Local businesses are why people stay in a community. They are the character of our community. They give back to our community. If you look at studies we know that 68 cents to every dollar goes back into the local economy when people spend money at a local business. When you spend money at a chain store, only 37 cents go back into the local economy."

The rules of the cash mob are simple: go to a local business at a set time, bring \$20 and spend it on anything in the store.

The group recently chose Pleasant Plains Workshop, a gallery that sells unique artwork and crafts. Everything in the store is made by local artists like Chris Haughery.

“I love my work and I like showing my work, you know, but I would be more excited about people just being able to see art, you know, just in general, you know, and for me to be a part of that, to be able to add to that I think is really cool.”

Owner Kristina Bilonick says the event was a huge success.

“It’s a win-win, and then the sales are icing on the cake.”

The cash mobs organized by Think Local First, DC have increased sales for local businesses in Washington by 500 percent. And the mob members say the events are so much fun that they look forward to being in one again, and spending their money locally.

New Ground is Found Between Muslims and Jews

Young Muslims and Jews in Los Angeles, California, are making friends with each other in an unusual way. They gather together at meetings set up by a group called NewGround. And they share personal stories to help build new relationships. June Simms has details.

On this particular evening, a Muslim neurosurgeon explains to the group that he was orphaned as a child. He says he was raised by a Jewish family who insisted that he follow the Islamic faith. A Jewish woman shares childhood memories of her grandparents. They were Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe. This is all taking place during a storytelling event organized by a group called NewGround.

Tanzila Ahmed is a Muslim from Bangladesh. She says the storytelling event helps celebrate the differences in cultures.

“It is such a kaleidoscope of stories and colors and different perspectives that when you are able to get narratives from the different communities, you can actually move the community together for a cause a lot easier.”

Edina Lekovic works for a Muslim support group. She says conflict in the Middle East reaches into Los Angeles and can build a wall between the Jewish and Muslim communities. She co-founded NewGround as a way to bring the two communities together.

“They know how to engage one another. They have authentic relationships, and at the same time, they are not trapped by what is going on overseas, but instead they are invested more so in what is happening here in Los Angeles.”

Each year, 20 young Muslim and Jewish professionals are selected to take part in an interfaith program. The program is aimed at helping them gain the skills, relationships and contacts necessary to affect how Muslims and Jews relate to each other in the United States. The participants attend two weekend gatherings and meet twice a month from November to June to learn from each other and from community leaders.

At one recent gathering, a presentation on the history of Islam sparked a discussion among the latest group of NewGround fellows.

Rabbi Sarah Bassin is the executive director of NewGround. She says many organizations bring Jews and Christians together, but few exist to connect Jews and Muslims.

“That conversation largely has not begun. We do not have the vocabulary to sit down at the same table in the same way that the Jewish-Christian communities have worked out over the last 50 or 60 years, especially in a post-Holocaust era.”

New Jewish member Abbie Barash says has made some good friends through the group.

“And we have already become so close and I have just known them for like a month now. So it has become extremely valuable for me.”

Actor Amir Abdullah, a Muslim, says differences between the two groups will remain.

“No, Muslims and Jews are not going to agree on everything. Heck, most Muslims are not even going to agree with each other on everything. But if we are able to share those experiences and share how we feel, we can at least get to understand one another, and I think that is really important.”

NewGround members hope these efforts to build relations between Muslims and Jews will spread far beyond Los Angeles.

Sarah Brightman's "Dreamchaser"

London theatergoers first began hearing about Sarah Brightman in 1981, when she performed in the original production of "Cats." She went on to even greater fame as the star of another beloved musical, "Phantom of the Opera."

Since then, Sarah Brightman has won numerous awards and sold 30 million albums. Kelly Jean Kelly tells us about her latest, "Dreamchaser."

Sarah Brightman remembers watching the first moon landing in the summer of 1969. She says it changed her thinking. In her words, "It actually helped me understand what it was that I had to do in life, to further myself. From that moment, I started to work really hard."

"Dreamchaser" represents that hunger for reaching goals. She says space exploration influenced her decision to make the album.

In 2012, Sarah Brightman announced that she planned to make a space flight. Since then, she has been a “cosmonaut in training” with the Russian space program. She is to fly on a Soyuz rocket to the International Space Station after she finishes a world concert tour this year. The shows are to help publicize her new album.

On “Dreamchaser,” Sarah Brightman sings the Paul and Linda McCartney song “Venus and Mars.” Echo and other electronic sounds help create a sense of the huge size of space and the possibilities it holds. Brightman sings: *Standing in the hall / of the great cathedral / Waiting for the transport to come / Starship 21ZNA9...*

Sarah Brightman says “Dreamchaser” was influenced by her cosmonaut training. “It’s what we do,” she says, “we look out at the night sky and we dream and we imagine and we explore.”

We leave you with a song that sounds like flight itself. Here is Sarah Brightman performing "Glosoli," an Icelandic expression meaning bright sun. She begins with the words *There is a room / It floats above the stars / This is my home / It's filled with twisted light...*

I'm Onka Dekker. Our show was written by Christopher Cruise and Caty Weaver who was also the producer. Carla Babb provided additional reporting.

Do you have a question about American life. Send an e-mail to mosaic@voanews.com. We'll try to answer your question on a future show.

Join us again next week for music and more on American Mosaic, from VOA Learning English.