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Visitor lets me see my community through fresh eyes

Guiding a friend who is studying a religion a month into Charlotte's Jewish community.

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Andrew Bowen, left, and Charlotte hostess Harriet Meetz, who is freelance writer Michael J. Solender's wife. Michael J. Solender photo



Michael J. Solender for Neighbors of the City. His column is called 'neighborhoods'

Sometimes it takes entertaining an out-of-town visitor to explore Charlotte neighborhoods I often overlook. That is precisely what happened earlier this month when my wife and I played host to a Queen City visitor with an unusual tourist agenda. My online computer "virtual" friend, Andrew Bowen of Lumberton, was visiting Charlotte as a jumpstart to his exploration of Judaism, its traditions and beliefs.

The visit and immersion in Jewish worship and culture are part of Bowen's ambitious year long spiritual journey and quest he's named Project Conversion. With a population estimated between 13,000 and 15,000, the Charlotte metro region has the largest concentration of Jews in the Carolinas.

Together we visited Shalom Park, attended Sabbath services at Temple Beth El, Saturday morning services at Temple Israel and met with Rabbi Yossi Groner, the leader of Charlotte's Orthodox Congregation, Ohr HaTorah.

A religious studies student, Bowen is using the 2011 calendar year to explore twelve distinct religions, one each month. He strives to immerse himself as completely as he can in the traditions and rituals of each explored faith in order to experience a follower's perspective from the inside out.

According to Bowen, his goal is to become part of the solution and help others see what unites people and what common ground exists across faiths, values and beliefs. He said, "I started Project Conversion in order to help influence others to step out of their comfort zones and understand other perspectives and beliefs."

Bowen is documenting his journey on his website projectconversion.com/.

"I've come at this from an agnostic point of view," says Bowen, who was exposed to the Baptist faith as a child and was a practicing Christian for many years before deciding to explore other faiths with no bias or preconceived notions.

He started in January following the teachings of the Hindu faith. He then explored the teachings of the Baha'i, followed by Zoroastrianism in March. After Judaism, Bowen will learn about Buddhism, Mormonism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism and several other world religions.

He explores each religion through the help of a mentor who serves as a touchstone and provides resources and referrals during each month of his journey.

Bowen asked me if I would be his mentor for the month. I saw this as a wonderful chance to reconnect with my upbringing and share many of the wonderful local Jewish resources I knew existed.

During his brief visit to Charlotte, I introduced him to many aspects of Jewish life in Charlotte. During the process I saw with fresh eyes the vibrant Jewish culture and heritage in our city and the many resources and offerings that are available.

Michael J. Solender is a freelance writer.

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Marcus Speh Writer, formally known as Finnegan Flawnt. Curator of the 1000 penguins project. Maitre d' of kaffe in katmandu.

That's a fantastic project. I'm following it from Berlin, Germany. Very excited to hear you're mentoring Andrew on this leg of his journey!

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