Drew’s Center on Religion, Culture & Conflict was founded 10 years ago to foster peace between people of disparate backgrounds. Today its mission is more timely than ever.
The year was 2007. Chris Taylor surveyed the global landscape and saw a world in crisis. A professor of comparative religion and Islamic studies, Taylor envisioned a forum that would promote peaceful solutions among people from different cultures, ethnicities and religions.

From Taylor’s vision emerged the Center on Religion, Culture & Conflict (CRCC). This year the center, now under the direction of Jonathan Golden, assistant professor of anthropology and comparative religion, marks its 10th anniversary. Over its first decade, Taylor notes, the Center “brought people of different faiths together to work on meaningful projects that leverage religion to unite rather than divide people.” To help celebrate the occasion, we compiled a list of 10 milestones that reflect the mission of a center that seeks to move us beyond mere tolerance for one another toward mutual respect for everyone.

ARTS OF RESPECT

The arts can be a powerful force for promoting empathy and sparking conversations about difference. That idea inspired the founding of Arts of Respect, a program conceived and endowed in 2009 by Paul Drucker C’51, P’83. Today Arts of Respect offers students grants of up to $1,000 to fund art projects that reflect the program’s founding vision. Last year the program funded “Generation Z: On the Margin,” an exhibit at Brothers College combining photographic portraits of 13 Drew students of color and their accompanying essays on the experience of being multiracial. The show’s cocurator, Pearl Lee C’18, expressed her hope that it would “help the diverse Drew community discuss and explore the concept of race in a respectful and earnest manner.”

SAAD EDDIN IBRAHIM, THE FIRST WALLERSTEIN DISTINGUISHED VISITING SCHOLAR

In 2009 a generous gift from Jane and Bernard Wallerstein enabled the CRCC to bring to Drew one of the world’s most eminent scholar-activists, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Egyptian democracy activist, founder of The Arab Organization for Human Rights and Nobel Peace Prize nominee. Ibrahim came to Drew just before and during the series of protests across the Middle East that came to be known as the Arab Spring, offering students a unique insider’s perspective on events shaping the world. Nate Chase C’11, a student in one of Ibrahim’s seminars at Drew, echoes the sentiments of many who studied with him at the time. “You realize,” Chase says, “that you’re sitting with a giant.”

SHAFIK GABR FELLOWS

Since 2013, Drew has been an essential annual stop for recipients of the Gabr Fellowship (also known as East-West: The Art of Dialogue), founded by the Egyptian billionaire and philanthropist Shafik Gabr to span the gap between the Arab world and the West. The Gabr fellows—emerging leaders from Egypt, the United States and other nations—live and work together in Egypt and the United States, collaborating on projects that further the cause of cultural bridge-building. Gabr’s dream of spanning the cultural divide is finding expression in the fellowship’s participants. “I have come to believe,” says 2016 fellow Mohamed Elattar, founder of the Egyptian tour company Ramasside Travel, “that East and West are not so different after all.”

SHORT TREC'S

To introduce students to the world beyond The Forest, Taylor and Golden created CRCC-focused ShortTREC's—international courses, designed by Drew faculty, offered during breaks in the academic year. Inspired by the Center’s mission to achieve a more peaceful world through cross-cultural understanding, Taylor led a TREC (the acronym stands for “Travel, Rethink, Explore, Connect”) to Egypt in 2010 and, later that year, he and Golden led another to Israel. Since then, Golden has led four TREC excursions to Ireland. Engy Gadelmawla C’17 says of her own TREC to Ireland: “I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to travel, experience other social and political systems and be open to new things.”

INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Thirty young religious leaders took part in Drew’s first Institute on Religion and Conflict Transformation in 2013, thanks to a major grant from The Carnegie Corporation of New York. The experience was nothing short of life-changing. Hailing from Egypt, Indonesia, Israel, Pakistan and Nigeria, many had never met someone outside their own religion. Yet over four weeks the group of male and female Christians, Muslims and Jews lived and studied together, learned to build positive relationships with other religious communities and challenged the dogma of radical religious leaders. “By bringing together young Muslim, Christian and Jewish leaders,” Taylor says, “and giving them the opportunity they would otherwise never have to meet, live with, get to know and make friends with one another, we radically transform their worldview.”
Nature knows no borders: That’s the founding principle of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, an academic and research organization in which Jordanians, Palestinians, Israelis and others come together to study the Middle East’s most pressing environmental challenges. Arava is one of the CRCC’s global partners, and in 2014 Golden led one of the institute’s “transboundary tours” of Israel, Palestine and Jordan, introducing faculty members from across the United States to Arava’s groundbreaking work in renewable energy, water management, sustainable agriculture and development and socio-ecological research. “The CRCC believes deeply in the potential for economic partnerships to serve as powerful tools for peacemaking,” Golden notes. “This is especially true of the type of environmental cooperation advanced by the Arava Institute.”

Shirley Sugerman Interfaith Forum Hosts Eboo Patel

Golden calls the Sugerman Forum “one of the foundational pillars upon which the center was built.” Founded in 1991 and endowed by Sugerman G’70 and others, the forum encourages exchanges among teachers, scholars, religious leaders and others exploring issues related to interfaith understanding. In 2012 the Sugerman Forum welcomed Eboo Patel, a founder and CEO of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core, which advocates for the interfaith movement on college campuses. In his memoir, Acts of Faith, Patel wrote: “To see the other side, to defend another people, not despite your tradition but because of it, is the heart of pluralism.” As a Sugerman speaker, Patel offered advice on how college students can bring this idea to fruition.

The New Neighbors Initiative

Since September 2016, a cadre of some 20 Drew students has made a weekly trip to Elizabeth, New Jersey, aiming to help refugee families adjust to their new lives in the United States. As part of CRCC’s nascent New Neighbors project, the students distribute school supplies to refugee children from Syria, Sudan and elsewhere, and offer tutoring, homework help and English lessons. “The students we tutor have such a strong sense of determination to make the most of being in America,” says Bongiwe Bongwe C’19, an international relations major. “To be able to help them and chart their progress is an irreplaceable experience.”

The Muslim and Jewish Women’s Leadership Conference

In 2016, the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, an organization of Muslim and Jewish women founded to promote interfaith understanding, held its third annual leadership conference at Drew with the support of the CRCC. As a time of mounting discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities, nearly 500 women attended, listening raptly to guest speaker Cory Booker, New Jersey’s junior U.S. senator. Booker’s stories of love conquering hate during history’s darkest hours “brought the women to their feet cheering,” reported The New York Times in a front-page story. “We need to show the world that we are all Americans,” said the Sisterhood’s executive director, Sheryl Olitzky, in her opening remarks. “We are here because we love each other, and we are overcoming hate.”

Senator George Mitchell Accepts the Peacebuilder Award

When the CRCC first compiled its dream list of potential honorees for the newly conceived Peacebuilder Award, a prize designed to honor those who foster peace and understanding, one name came up again and again: George Mitchell, the former U.S. senator from Maine and broker of the historic Good Friday agreement that ended decades of conflict in Northern Ireland. In May, Golden was finally able to present Mitchell with the award, calling him “our exemplar.” In a ceremony in the Ehinger Center, Mitchell spoke stirringly about the most pressing challenges of the 21st century: globalization, technological and climate change, population growth and the movement of people across borders. Citing ideals “that are the basis and the promise of American life,” Mitchell said he remained optimistic that Americans could meet those challenges. “They are not easily summarized,” he said, “but surely they include the sovereignty of the people, the primacy of individual liberty—our highest value, an independent judicial system, the rule of law applied equally to every person and, crucially, to the government itself and opportunity for everyone. It is our commitment to these ideals that makes us Americans.”