THE DAILY CLIPS

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Other faiths see Christmastime as business as usual

Dr. Moahad Dar is on call Christmas Day this year, which he said he was glad to do as a friendly gesture to his co-workers.

BY KATHRYN KENNEDY
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday was a normal day for employees of the Grand China Buffet. They greeted customers, prepared steaming troughs of egg rolls and rice, and collected payments at the register. And it will be business as usual for the rest of this week — including Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

"We have a different religion in Asia," said manager Vicky Lin. "Most are Buddhists."

Her full staff will be working today to welcome hungry non-celebrators as well as Christians who are burned out on ham and turkey. Lin said the number of diners varies annually, so she's making no predictions this time around.

"This year the economy is really bad," she said.

There are many, like Lin, who will not open gifts around decorated trees, attend church services or sing carols today. People from the other diverse cultures and religions of Pitt County have their own plans.

Across town at Pitt County Memorial Hospital, endocrinologist Dr. Moahad Dar also will be working. He is on call Christmas Day this year, which he said he was glad to do as a friendly gesture to his co-workers.

"Most of my other colleagues, they celebrate Christmas," said Dar, a Muslim and faculty member at East Carolina University's Brody School of Medicine. "We have our own holidays and they help on those. If you can't be with your family, it's kind of a downer. You don't get to enjoy it as much."

He hopes to use the day to get caught up on work, as there are no elective surgeries scheduled that day, and he would be called in only for emergencies.

Meanwhile, his wife and children, ages 7 and 9, will stay around the house or maybe visit their grandparents. It's just another day home from school for them. Dar said his son and daughter probably have mixed feelings about Christmas.

"We talk to them and mention to them about our own holidays," he said. "And we try to make those special and exciting so they associate good times and being with family with their own holidays."

Dar said that belonging to a relatively small Muslim community, his children may feel left out during gift-giving and other Christian traditions surrounding them at school. He admitted having those feelings himself as a child growing up in Greenville.

"You are somewhat isolated," he said.

Dar's father, Saeed Dar, is chair of the nine-member consultative body for the Al Masjid Islamic Center and Mosque — Pitt County's center for Muslim worship. He said not everyone in the local community chooses to work that day, as many businesses aren't open at all.

Many local Muslims take advantage of vacation days during the holiday season to travel, hold weddings or visit extended family overseas, he said.

"They have more days to travel, the kids are out of school," he noted.

Last year, one family even made their hajj — a trip to the holy city of Mecca which must be made once in a person's lifetime — during the week of Christmas. Hajj traditionally occurs from the eighth to the 12th day of the 12th month of the Islamic calendar, Saeed Dar explained. That corresponded with Dec. 17-21 on the western calendar in 2007, so they chose to make the pilgrimage. This year it fell in the first week of the month, but in 2009 it will start Christmas Day.

Also governed by a separate calendar is Judaism's Hanukkah. The eight-day celebration always falls between late November and late December, but overlaps with Christmas Day this year.

Jewish families will be celebrating their own holiday with presents and games for the children as they gather around the menorah each evening through Dec. 28.

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Iranians honor UNC scholar
Ahmadinejad will present the award

BY YONAT SHIMRON
STAFF WRITER

Carl Ernst, a UNC-Chapel Hill religion professor, is no stranger to awards. He has received close to a dozen over the years.

But when he was told he would be the recipient of the Farabi International Award given by the Islamic Republic of Iran, he paused.

The Farabi Award, named for a 10th-century Persian philosopher, is awarded to scholars by none other than Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Although the Iranian president has no hand in selecting the winners — they are chosen by a committee within the government ministry of science, research and technology — he does hand out the plaques.

Ernst is a scholar of Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, and has traveled widely in Iran. But he has never met the president and, like most Americans, cringes at some of his policies.

So when he was notified that he was one of three Americans to win the award this year, he felt he needed to clear it with the university’s top brass.

“I didn’t want anyone to be surprised by this,” Ernst said.

UNC-CH Chancellor Holden Thorp understood the dilemma.

“He said, ‘This looks like an academic honor. Politics inserts itself into these things, and we understand that.’” Ernst said.

So on Tuesday night, Ernst left for Tehran. It will be his second trip this month.

When he was there at a conference earlier in December, he made a strong plea for improved academic and cultural relations between Iran and the United States.

“There was an incredibly enthusiastic response,” Ernst said. “So it would have looked strange if I declined an academic award.”

Ernst will be honored for a book he wrote in 1996 on Ruzbihan Baqli, a 12th-century Sufi poet born in what is now Iran. The book, which has been translated twice into Persian, is widely used in university courses there.

Saturday’s award banquet is expected to last three hours. Ernst will share the stage with two other U.S. academics, William Chittick, a religion scholar at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and Miriam Galston, a lawyer at George Washington University.

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