

Repairing the World

Michael Pappas and Rita Semel continue the San Francisco Interfaith Council's decades-long dedication to human rights.

STORY BY JENNIFER BLOT | PHOTO BY SPENCER BROWN

When the North Bay fires broke out this fall, the San Francisco Interfaith Council did more than just encourage prayer. The Presidio-based nonprofit quickly turned to board members, leaders from the Red Cross and Salvation Army and counterparts at other interfaith organizations. Together, they deployed teams to provide shelter, supplies and counseling; closer to home, they opened clean-air stations at congregations around San Francisco.

For nearly 30 years, the San Francisco Interfaith Council has united clergy and congregants from the City's temples, churches and mosques to gather in prayer, share community meals and simply talk about centuries-old issues. Much of this occurs at a cautiously optimistic pace; yet when it comes time to address dire issues in the community, the organization moves swiftly.

"Disaster prevention and response is very much in our DNA and a core mission," says SFIC Executive Director **Michael Pappas**, a former Greek Orthodox priest who served three years on the council's board before assuming his post a decade ago. "There's a practical dimension and a spiritual dimension that can't be replicated in other sectors," he adds.

The first time the organization mobilized during disaster was in its infancy, in 1989, after the Loma Prieta earthquake. Since then, SFIC has forged bonds with constituents from 800 congregations across the city—from Baptist and Buddhist to Muslim and Mormon—maintaining an open mind and open-door policy. Its wings have spread from hosting a World AIDS Day interfaith service and the legendary Interfaith Breakfast on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving—this year marked its 20th anniversary—to collaborating with the San Francisco Opera for a music-and-faith-filled ceremony on the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

And though the ominous "Patriot Prayer" rally scheduled at Crissy Field this summer never happened, SFIC was ready. Pappas

worked with city leaders to create powerful messaging and a plan, which lent credence to the potential of a church-and-state relationship. Pappas explains, "We serve as the portal through which public officials and nongovernmental organizations can speak to the broader faith community—and vice versa."

Pappas is SFIC's primary spokesperson, but he is quick to praise **Rita Semel**, who co-founded the organization and is still at the forefront of its big decisions. At 96, Semel is remarkable for reasons beyond her age—and the fact she's shepherded SFIC without pay all these years. She started out as a journalist—one of two female news reporters at the *San Francisco Chronicle* during World War II—and was the first editor of the *Northern California Jewish Bulletin*. Later, she became the voice of the Jewish Community Relations Council and served on the boards of Catholic Charities, Grace Cathedral and her own place of worship, Temple Emanu-El. Semel's thirst for taking on cause after cause somehow coexisted with her role as a wife and mother, the kind of mother who instilled a strong sense of faith and principle in her children, taking them at a young age to hear **Martin Luther King Jr.** speak at the Cow Palace.

Semel's grassroots organizing picked up speed in the early 1960s when she worked closely with the late **Rev. Eugene Boyle** to organize the four-day San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns. She gathered with the conference's leaders sporadically for years to continue interfaith advocacy, but a summons from the city's mayor during a wet winter in 1988 spurred them to action.

"Mayor **Art Agnos** called clergy into his office and said, 'We don't have enough shelter beds for the homeless. You've got to open your doors and get your congregations to provide meals,'" Semel recalls. And so, four congregations opened their doors and a dozen more

provided meals through the rainy season. Months later, when the earthquake struck, Semel's group was ready.

It seems Semel is perpetually ready. Pappas admits, "She works to realize the Jewish ideal *tikkun olam*, which means 'repairing the world.' She uses every breath of her being to make the world a better place, to repair the ills of the world—and she does it by bringing people together."

Semel's tireless work has caught the attention of every San Francisco mayor since **George Christopher**. She calls herself a "busybody" and others agree that she's

fearless when it comes to picking up the phone to prod politicians—or newspaper staff.

"Can anyone remember a time in San Francisco when Rita Semel was not working to bring together people of different religious traditions in a tireless search for common spiritual ground? I can't," recalls **Don Lattin**, who became the *Chronicle's* religion writer from 1988 to 2006. "She'd

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—Don Lattin, former San Francisco Chronicle writer

already been at it for a couple decades when I resurrected the religion beat at the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1983." He adds, "Rita was always a voice of reason in a world with too much fanaticism, egomania, intolerance, misunderstanding and magical thinking." When Semel looks back on SFIC's challenges over the years, she doesn't single out a period when things were better—or worse. "We grew with the times," she says. Today, the organization is faced with overwhelming priorities—homelessness, immigration and affordable housing—that don't have easy solutions. On top of it all, Semel and Pappas acknowledge the fact that they're striving to tackle big issues in a city that has been deemed one of the most "irreligious" in the country.

But they know better. **NHG**

Rita Semel and Michael Pappas in the Presidio Chapel.

