

Ramadan brings different cultures to the table

Amy McNeilage, Sydney Morning Herald, 12 August 2012



Fast food ... Punchbowl Boys students, family and friends share iftar.

Photo: Jacky Ghossein

Alex Kubienski is not a Muslim. But he has been abstaining from food during Ramadan. The 18-year-old is vice-captain at Punchbowl Boys High School, where a majority of the students are fasting. That means nil by mouth from dusk to dawn for a month.

As a sign of respect to his mates, Alex tries not to eat during the school day. "I don't really like to eat in front of the boys," he said. "If I was going to eat, I'd leave the school or go out the front out of respect."

He did get to enjoy a feed with his peers at the school's annual community dinner. Hundreds of students, staff and community members came together for an *iftar*, which is the breaking of the fast in the evening during Ramadan.

Student Adam Sabsabi played down the difficulty of his daily fast, claiming the hunger subsides towards the end of the day. But the 17-year-old did admit: "You'd eat anything after fasting."

His friend Hamzeh Arja was less subtle in his enthusiasm for the meal. "You're counting down those last few seconds and you just can't wait for it," he said at Thursday night's dinner. "Imagine going the whole day without eating. It's just the best. It's not like a normal feed. I can't explain it."

Despite his appetite, Hamzeh took a modest serving, explaining the practice is not about hunger but self-discipline and restraint.

"It's a struggle," he said. "We know how it feels for people in other countries where they have no food." The community gathering is in its seventh year and was developed by the school's principal, Jihad Dib.



Alex Kubienski

"I could really see the value of the community coming together and what a great opportunity to do it during Ramadan when it's all about dinners and family and community," he said. "Food is a great equaliser."

Iftar was a new experience for Melissa McCurdie from St Ives, who attended as a member of the Jewish Board of Deputies.

The group has been meeting weekly with Muslim women from the Olivetree Women's Network to cook and share food as a way of strengthening ties between the communities. "It's wonderful to see how something as basic as food and cooking can break down barriers," she said. "You discover you actually have much more in common than you realise."