

Jews, Palestinians talk peace under the pines at Tawonga

by Alexandra J. Wall
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When Suleiman al-Khatib told his story at Tawonga's Peacemakers Camp two years ago, the fact that he had spent 10 years in prison for stabbing an Israeli soldier made him stand out among the participants. He pledged at that time to stay involved with Tawonga, and bring back many more like him.

He didn't disappoint. Al-Khatib has been Tawonga's Palestinian representative for the past two years now, and thanks to his efforts, the camp this year hosted many others like him.

The fifth annual Oseh Shalom-Sanea al-Salam Peacemakers Camp is an outgrowth of the Bay Area's many Jewish-Palestinian dialogue groups founded by Len and Libby Traubman of San Mateo. It was held Oct. 5-8, this year with an emphasis on youth and those already working in numerous peace and coexistence organizations. Groups like Combatants for Peace sent representatives, as did the village Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, which consists of equal numbers of Arabs and Jews.

The 140 participants also included some Arabs and Jews from the Bay Area, though Jalal Ghazi, a San Franciscan of Palestinian origin, tried unsuccessfully to recruit Arab students from local universities. "It's easier bringing Palestinians from over there than from here," he said.



Deddy Paz



Raya Ziada

As in previous years, participants gathered in San Francisco the night after camp ended, this year at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco, to tell their stories to the public and each other. And while sharing their stories came fairly easily to those on the podium, it was emphasized that the weekend was not without its difficult moments.

For Israeli Deddy Paz, it served as a reminder that much work needs to be done when he returns home.

For a while, he said, he had abandoned his efforts of working toward peace because more pressing matters were on his mind, mainly paying his mortgage and supporting his family.

But the weekend reminded him "there isn't another side," he said.

“The consequences of what’s happening will affect my children just as much as they will affect Raya’s children,” he said, referring to the Palestinian woman sitting next to him. “If we keep having Israelis and Palestinians meeting each other for the first time at a checkpoint, we’ll never have a solution. They need to meet each other when they are 4 years old.”

Palestinian Raya Ziada said her first meeting with Israelis was when soldiers barged into her house in the middle of the night to arrest her father. Her brother is dying in an Israeli jail, she said, and she meets with the other side because “that may be the only chance I have to help save his life.”

Leah Lublin moved to Israel from Toronto 12 years ago. She described herself as a member of a very right-wing organization when she got there, but she had an awakening when friends of her children were killed in a terrorist attack. The mother of five heard about an interfaith dialogue group and mustered up the courage to go.

“The first time I sat with 25 Palestinians, all the misconceptions I had about them flew out the window,” she said. “I became a peace addict.”

Mohammed Atwa, the son of a high ranking official under Arafat in the Palestine Liberation Organization, somehow found his way to the Arava Institute in Israel, where he worked on environmental issues with his fellow Arabs and Jews. When he first

arrived, he was astonished to learn that his roommate was Jewish. They didn’t speak for the whole first week, and even in that first month, they could only muster up a “good morning.”

“I couldn’t get used to a Jew sleeping next to my bed,” he said.

Now studying for his Ph.D. in Kansas, Atwa said he believes his mission is to convince anyone who will listen that dialogue and peace is the answer.

“Israel is a fact, you can’t fight it,” he said. “Palestine is a fact, you can’t fight it.”