

'People talking from the heart'

Jewish, Arab, Muslim students hold dialogue at Georgetown

by Eric Fingerhut
Staff Writer

An Arab student stands up to discuss an argument about the Middle East he had with his Jewish dorm hallmate, and how unfortunate it was that the discussion had turned nasty. The Jewish hallmate stands up and apologizes for the incident. The two students embrace.

That was the scene on Tuesday of last week at Georgetown University, as Jewish, Arab and Muslim students came together for a dialogue that participants say should help ease tensions between the two groups.

The dialogue came after an incident last year that upset many Jewish and pro-Israel students. The Young Arab Leadership Alliance had set up a mock "checkpoint" on campus; students walking by who were deemed to be "Palestinian" had to present identification, while protesters dressed as Israeli soldiers searched and harassed protesters posing as Palestinians.

Last week's event was sponsored by the Office of Campus Ministry at Georgetown and a host of student groups, including the Young Arab Leadership Alliance, Jewish Student Association, Muslim Student Association, Georgetown Israel Alliance and Students for Middle East Peace.

The student dialogue developed gradually. First, the dialogue leaders explained that their discussions always begin with participants telling their "life stories,"

and demonstrated by talking about their own lives.

Len Traubman, who along with his wife, Libby, founded the 10-year-old Palestinian-Jewish Living Room Dialogue Group in California, talked about how he had never met a Palestinian until beginning a dialogue group.

Then Mohammed Al-Attar, who described himself as a Palestinian/Jordanian-American and participates in a dialogue group in San Antonio, recounted growing up in Jordan as an "angry young man" obsessed with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Al-Attar's life began to change when he was 28, he said, after first hearing about the Holocaust.

"It took me two years to believe it really happened," he said, because "I didn't want to believe it happened. If I believe it, then the Jewish people are human ... [and] someone suffered 300 times more than the Palestinians."

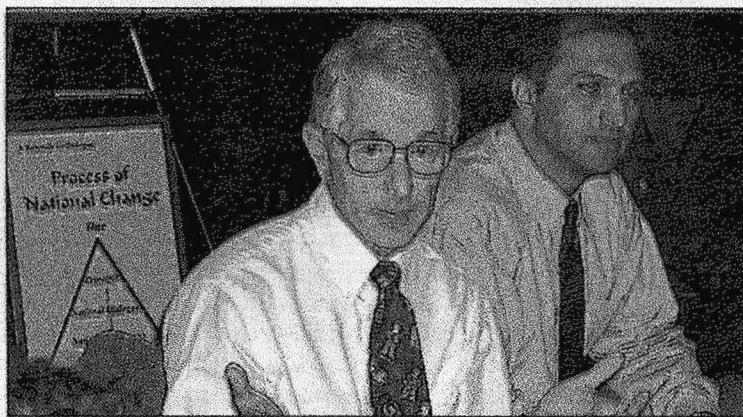
Calling his life in the United States a remarkable "journey," Al-Attar said that "every time I meet a Jewish person, I learn something."

He also recounted a recent visit to a Shabbat service, where he wore a *yarmulke*. "It feels so good to wear it," he said. "I always saw [it] as something against me."

Al-Attar urged those at the dialogue to "do a self-exam. ... We're not all terrorists. ... We want our kids to succeed just like you."

Traubman and Al-Attar emphasized that if both sides see the other as "human beings," then they can really "tackle the issues."

As the dialogue leaders opened



Len Traubman, left, and Mohammed Al-Attar lead a dialogue on the Middle East last week at Georgetown University.

Photo by Eric Fingerhut

up, so did the students. A Jewish student stood up and talked about how he was able to have a lengthy, educational discussion about the Middle East one-on-one with a Muslim student. A Muslim student talked about his Jewish best friend from high school, from whom he had learned about the Holocaust.

After the formal event wrapped up, some participants stayed around for up to an hour to continue talking to each other and the dialogue leaders.

Both Jewish and Arab students said that the dialogue helped to humanize each other and promoted respect.

Muhammad Shahbaz, who is active in Arab and Muslim groups, said there has been "very little

communication" between the groups, but this event was a chance to "reach out" and "establish friendship and community."

Rabbi Harold White, Georgetown's senior Jewish chaplain, said it was great to see "people talking from the heart." He hopes it will lead to a more positive atmosphere on campus.

He said that while Georgetown is often singled out as a school with tense relations among Jews and Arabs and Muslims, he sees on a "one-to-one level incredibly close relations" between pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian students. Confrontations arise from the organizations, which are often encouraged by "outspoken faculty," he said.

While many thought the dialogue

will pay dividends, some were still skeptical. Salomon Kalach — a former president of the Georgetown Israeli Alliance who became emotional during the dialogue when talking about his family's Syrian heritage and tensions with Arab students — said he was glad he was "able to release some pressure."

But, he added, "I don't know how this actually changes things." Kalach said that while the dialogue leaders urged students to see "the other side as humans, we already see each other as humans."

"It's a really, really intense conflict," he said, and problems arise from, for example, demonstrations that accuse Israel of taking "Nazi-like" actions.

Another attendee questioned how useful a dialogue between Jewish and Arab students is, since only Israeli and Palestinian leaders can truly settle the conflict.

But the Traubmans said dialogue among Americans helps to set an example.

"We want to be a light to the rest of the world," Libby Traubman said.

And perhaps the Traubmans were a light to Georgetown students. As a reporter spoke to Shahbaz, a Jewish acquaintance handed him a piece of paper with his phone number on it, hoping they could talk.