Dialog is not a place where you can point your finger at another person. Dialogue is a place where you can absorb what’s being said.’ — Elias Botto

Listening is the word in Mideast exchange

Cal Poly and SLO Library audiences told that Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue is about hearing other side

BY SARAH LENN
THE TRIBUNE

When Elias Botto was invited to join the Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group 13 years ago, the Palestinian refugee couldn’t wait to speak.

“I thought, it will give me a chance to show these Jews what they did to me and my family and my nation,” Botto said Sunday afternoon during a discussion at the Cal Poly PAC Pavilion.

Now, Botto said, he understands that listening is just as important.

“Dialogue is not a place where you can point your finger at another person,” Botto said “Dialogue is a place where you can absorb what’s being said.”

Sponsored by San Luis Obispo Middle-East Dialogue Group and seven local groups, Sunday’s event was aimed at promoting tolerance, education and understanding between people of diverse backgrounds, said Libby Traubman, who co-founded the Living Room Dialogue Group with her husband, Len.

The Bay area group also held a discussion Saturday at the San Luis Obispo City-County Library.

“The government can sign treaties

Please see DIALOGUE, A4

Robbie Franco, left, a Jewish-American, and Elias Botto, a Palestinian-American, spoke at a Middle East Peace Living Room Dialogue.
and map out borders. We can’t do that,” Libby Traubman said. “But we can do things the gov-
ernment can’t do, which is build
relations.”

After Botto and a Jewish member of the dialogue group, Robbie Franco, shared their sto-
ries, people in the audience of around 40 were invited to talk
to one another about their pasts, concerns and dreams.

Born in Jerusalem, Botto was 16 in 1948 when his family
abandoned their newly built
house and moved to the West
Bank city of Bethlehem — in
what was then a part of Jordan
—to avoid increased violence.

Botto came to the United
States in 1954 to work as a med-
ical technician. His parents
and sisters followed him in 1966,
taking a 40-day ocean voyage.

Botto said his father would lie
weeping on his bed, arms ex-
tended toward the heavens as he
prayed to return home. Both of
Botto’s parents died before they
could return to the Middle East.

In contrast, the San Francis-
cisco-born Franco went to Israel to
work at a kibbutz, or, collective
farm, after studying sociology at
UC Berkeley. Her great-grand-
fathers were rabbis in Russia.

“I felt that I was home, that
this crazy place, this Israel, felt
more like home than any place
I had lived for a long time,” said
Franco, who met her husband
at the kibbutz.

The couple returned to Cali-
fornia nearly 14 years later with
their three children, who con-
sider themselves Israelis.

Franco went to Israel last
year for her youngest daugh-
ter’s wedding to an Israeli and
was shocked by what she dis-
covered, she said.

“I had never before heard
young children say they hated
Arabs,” Franco said. “At one
point, you could have Palestini-
ans as friends and go together
to restaurants. It was OK. You
didn’t have to look at each oth-
er and wonder, ‘Will we get out
of here alive?’”

After the speakers talked and
asked each other questions, au-
dience members participated in
their own dialogues.

Ft. Bragg native Courtney
Dahl, 22, found herself chatting
with 19-year-old Naiyarah
Kolkailah, whose family moved
to the United States from Egypt
before she was born. Her fa-
thor, Faysal Kolkailah, is a pro-
fessor of aerospace engineering
at Cal Poly.

Both Cal Poly students said
they have experienced feelings
of isolation because of their re-
ligious backgrounds.

Dahl’s mother raised her as
Jewish, whereas Kolkailah’s
mother helped her better un-
derstand her Muslim faith.

“You have to decide, ‘OK, I’m
going to have an open mind. I’m
not going to argue,’ ” said
Kolkailah, who wore a white
silk headscarf and a long-
sleeved brown dress. “To reach
the truth, you have to under-
stand what the other person is
trying to say and talk between
each other.”

Participants said they enjoyed
the opportunity to discover what
they shared with people from dif-
ferent backgrounds and cultures.