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SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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**'Dialogue 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 LINN
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

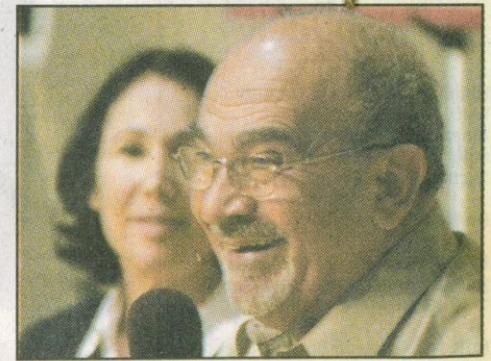
where you can absorb what's being said."

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



TRIBUNE PHOTO BY DAVID MIDDLECAMP

Robbie Franco, left, a Jewish-American, and Elias Botto, a Palestinian-American, spoke at a Middle East Peace Living Room Dialogue.

Dialogue

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and map out borders. We can't do that," Libby Traubman said. "But we can do things the government can't do, which is build relations."

After Botto and a Jewish member of the dialogue group, Robbie Franco, shared their stories, 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 medical 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 extended 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 Francisco-born Franco went to Israel to work at a kibbutz, or, collective farm, after studying sociology at UC Berkeley. Her great-grandfathers 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 California nearly 14 years later with their three children, who consider themselves Israelis.

Franco went to Israel last year for her youngest daughter's wedding to an Israeli and was shocked by what she discovered, she said.

"I had never before heard

Dialogue meetings

The San Luis Obispo Middle-East Dialogue Group meets every second Sunday in area homes for dinner and discussion. For more information, contact Lynne Levine at 788-0929 or Abir Tolba at 773-1533.

young children say they hated Arabs," Franco said. "At one point, you could have Palestinians as friends and go together to restaurants. It was OK. You didn't have to look at each other and wonder, 'Will we get out of here alive?'"

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

Ft. Bragg native Courtney Dahl, 22, found herself chatting with 19-year-old Naiyerah

Kolkailah, whose family moved to the United States from Egypt before she was born. Her father, Faysal Kolkailah, is a professor of aerospace engineering at Cal Poly.

Both Cal Poly students said they have experienced feelings of isolation because of their religious backgrounds.

Dahl's mother raised her as Jewish, whereas Kolkailah's mother helped her better understand 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 understand 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 different backgrounds and cultures.