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Douglass students seek common ground with dialogue among Jews and Arabs

by Marilyn Silverstein
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Two Douglass College women — one Jewish, with an Israeli/American heritage, the other Arab Christian, of Moroccan descent — have joined hands in an initiative to harness the power of women to promote Arab/Jewish peace.

The initiative, the Douglass College Middle East Coexistence Project, blossomed out of the friendship of two 19-year-old sophomores, Danielle Josephs of Teaneck and Nora Marrakchi of Dumont. The students kicked off the project together on the evening of April 27 with a campus forum, One Israeli, One Palestinian: Working Together for Peace.

“It kind of was a rude awakening for me that Arab and Jewish groups on campus really didn’t get along,” Josephs said in an interview prior to the program. “Often, there was a lot of hostility. I thought: ‘This has to change. And then I thought about the best way to change it — women.’”

Josephs, whose father is an Iraqi Jew living in Israel, is a political science/Middle Eastern studies major at Douglass. Currently the Israel director of the Rutgers University Hillel, she will take the helm as Hillel president in September.

“The project really has three goals,” she said. “The first is to enhance dialogue between Arabs/Muslims/Christians and Jews/Israelis at Rutgers University, with an emphasis on Douglass women. The second goal is to encourage women’s involvement in international conflict resolution and negotiation.

“The third goal is probably the most important,” she said. “In 2006-2007, we’re going to be establishing in one of Douglass’s residence halls a wing for coexistence, which will house Douglass women in an actual living exercise in coexistence. The purpose of the project is to emphasize our commonalities rather than our differences.”

For Marrakchi, a native of Elizabeth who grew up in Fez and Marrakech, commonality is also the key. A French and economics major, she serves as treasurer of the Lebanese American Society at Rutgers.

“The whole idea is to educate people from the Jewish community and the Arab community,” Marrakchi said in an interview. “There are such things as Iraqi Jews, Moroccan Jews, Tunisian Jews. They took a little of their background with them even when they went to Israel. There are a lot of similarities. They eat the same food; they listen to the same music. It’s so simple, yet people don’t seem able to grasp it. I really

feel this program will open people's eyes and make them realize we're more similar than we think.

"I'm really excited, because we're not focusing so much on taking sides," she added. "We're really trying to provide a balanced forum where each is able to speak. When educated people are able to find commonality, it allows for discussion to begin."

In the Art History Building on the Douglass campus, the discussion of One Israeli, One Palestinian: Working Together for Peace was about to begin.

"I'm excited about the first opportunity to have this open dialogue," said Carmen Twillie Ambar, dean of Douglass College, who has given her blessing to the coexistence project. "I think it's a combination of student initiative and some of the desire we've had at the college to talk about areas of conflict and women's global leadership — about women's voices and the leadership women bring to the table."

The Palestinian voice for One Israeli, One Palestinian was that of Alma Abdul-hadi Jadallah, a specialist in conflict resolution and a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University in Fairfax County, Va. But the scheduled Israeli speaker — Chen Zak, an expert in nuclear nonproliferation — was unable to appear. At the last minute, Josephs and Marrakchi drafted Israeli Yael Zerubavel, director of Rutgers' Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, to fill in.

The Bildner Center cosponsored the program, together with Douglass College, the Islamic Society of Rutgers University, the Israel Action Committee of Rutgers University, Rutgers Hillel, and several university departments.

"I think this is very exciting," said Zerubavel, who was just back from a yearlong sabbatical in Israel. "I think it's a way to promote tolerance and coexistence... and to build human trust."

In her extemporaneous remarks, Zerubavel focused on how her experiences as a young Israeli Army recruit made her "realize how awful war could be. If there is a way to work toward peace, I am standing in that camp, personally."

She also described the leadership roles women play in Israeli peace organizations — not so much in the largest organization, Shalom Achshav (Peace Now), she said, but rather in smaller peace groups such as the Four Mothers, New Profile, and Women in Black.

Conflict-resolution work is not easy, said Abdul-hadi Jadallah, whose parents are from Nablus, in "historical Palestine," as she called it.

“Sometimes, you think you understand conflict, but it is a very dynamic process,” she said. “Conflict resolution work... makes you reflect on your values and beliefs. One of the things you learn to do is to unpack the assumptions the parties bring to the table.

“What are the lessons we learn around all of this? We learn through the conflict-resolution field that one of the most important things...is to really think about the role of culture and structure,” she said. “We also need to acknowledge each other’s humanity.”

For example, Abdul-hadi Jadallah said that during a contentious conference not long ago, she and her colleague, a Palestinian physician, found themselves alone in an elevator with another conference participant, an older Israeli woman.

“She looks at me and my colleague, and all of a sudden she shows us a side of her chest. ‘You know what? I just had a mastectomy,’ she said. And the doctor said to her, ‘You know what? It’s infected.’

“There we were, three women sharing her pain,” Abdul-hadi Jadallah said. “All of a sudden, we were there taking care of each other — caring about her, her age, her vulnerability, her sense of dignity.

“We transcended our nationality,” she said. “In a very humble way, we understood our mortality together.”

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