

UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER

by Abbeygail Epelman featured in the September 8, 2011 issue of the Jewish News

One UM-D student's involvement in leadership programs leads to having compassion for both sides of the Middle East conflict. By Abbeygail Epelman

What if you went through your entire life and one day you reflect back and realize you had never traveled to that one place of your dreams? You ponder on the experience, why you want it so badly, what you would gain from going there, and then you have a choice.

Do you commit to the idea and start to research, plan and act? Or do you shrug off the idea as a good yet unobtainable dream? Perhaps you leave it to faith to allow it to happen in your lifetime, but it's not for you to initiate? This same process goes through our minds when it comes to peace and especially action needed to obtain peace in the Middle East.

So, why is it that such a good idea, an idea like peace, isn't embraced and acted upon by all? Is it because not all feel they are capable of such an endeavor? Or perhaps they don't have the drive for a better tomorrow? Or maybe they feel like someone else will take care of it.

Peace and coexistence take every single person to achieve. We need to eliminate the mindset that "one day someone else will do it."

Because that one day is today, and the someone is us.

I started my undergraduate degree at the University of Michigan-Dearborn in the fall of 2009. It was the first time I had been introduced to such a large Arab American population and, being an anthropology major with a minor in religious studies, I was pretty excited to learn and observe a population unfamiliar to me. I made friends with many men and women in my classes; I asked a ton of questions and even read the Koran.

Minor incidents started occurring on campus that made me less comfortable with my Jewish identity. There were many anti-Zionist and anti-Israel organizations on campus and, to me, that meant anti-Jewish. Such incidents and misunderstandings lead me to not wear my Star of David to school. I didn't involve myself much with the Jewish community or speak up because I didn't want my social life negatively affected.

My second year at UM-D, I decided I wouldn't put up with the one-sided promotions any more. I have always been an outspoken woman, and this year it really came out. Organizations like ASU (Arab Student Union), MSA (Muslim Student Association), HOPE (Humanitarian Organization for

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Palestinian Equality) had events year-round involving anti-Israel topics. I made an effort to get the materials they were passing out, and I was shocked -- could these statistics and facts be correct? Maybe Israel isn't what I thought it was after all?

My doubt concerned me; I stuck up for Israel whenever I had the chance to, but what was I suppose to say when the things I read left me speechless? I was one person. I was outnumbered, and I didn't know where to start. I saw an announcement on the Hillel of Metro Detroit website for a fellowship involving Israel advocacy and I submitted my resume.

I was accepted into the fellowship, which lasted 10 weeks and covered a variety of topics such as the history, military, lifestyles, conflict, international industry and Israel right here in Michigan. The fellowship not only strengthened my identity as a Jew, but also as a Zionist, a member of the community and an advocate for the positive outcomes of the Jewish State of Israel.

New Type Of Leadership During one of our sessions, I was introduced to Brenda Rosenberg, who spoke to me about a pilot leadership program called Tectonic Leadership. I was immediately interested. She called, and I was admitted into the five-day retreat in early May.

The days leading up to the retreat were uneasy. I had no idea what to expect or how to behave. The only people I knew going into the retreat were my good friends Hussein Berry and Hamzah Latif, both are Muslim students at UM-D.

The retreat was held at the Manresa Jesuit Retreat House in Bloomfield Hills and opened on Yom HaShoah, a day I hold close to my heart, being a first-generation Holocaust survivor's decedent. Normally, I spend the day in quiet meditation, reflecting on my life, and those of my grandparents, great-grandparents and family affected by the Holocaust, hoping that their struggles make me a stronger person. Brenda spoke beautifully about the importance of Yom HaShoah and lit a candle in memory of all the lives lost. As tears fell from my eyes, Hussein squeezed my hand and I knew from that moment on that this would be a life-changing week.

Throughout the days of the Tectonic Leadership retreat, 15 other Muslim, Jewish and Christian students and I learned the disciplines and commitments of Tectonic Leadership. We created bonds with each other that no one could replace. We shared our pain, positive experiences, tears, frustration, happiness and most of all, a common goal for peaceful solutions.

Samia Bahsoun and Brenda Rosenberg, creators of Tectonic Leadership, inspired, challenged and motivated us continuously with their wisdom and

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experience in conflict resolution and the beautiful friendship they have created. Throughout the week, not only did I learn so much from the Muslim perspective, but also I stopped seeing them as "the other" and began seeing them as my brothers and sisters. I looked around the room and did not see individuals, but all of us as one, working together to see tension as an opportunity, not an obstacle in partnering.

A surprising thing happened during my time at Manresa: My core beliefs about Israel and my Jewish and Zionist identity strengthened as did my understanding of the Palestinian pain.

I realized that you do not have to give up any of your beliefs to accept another's. One doesn't have to be wrong, so another can be right.

The lines and differences between Palestine and Israel have faded. The people are one, brothers and sisters. There is nothing more important than saving human lives. The world is full of people who want to be better, different and superior. Every single human being means just as much as the next, and one life is as important as your own; neither of you are replaceable.

Tectonic Leadership was a life-changing experience, and one that will continue throughout my life. We are committed to a friendship and unbreakable bond with each other. We are committed to bringing peace and understanding to all that we can reach. @ Abbeygail Epelman is a third-year student at University of Michigan-Dearborn and is a Peer Network Engagement Intern at Hillel of Metro Detroit. She currently lives in Canton. To learn more about Tectonic Leadership, go to <http://www.tectonicleadership.org>.