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ATEF EL-SAYED 2007



Photography by Atef El-Sayed

Pictured from left to right:  
Brenda Rosenberg and Imad Hamad.

## Can One Friendship Save the World?

Commentary by Raad Alawan  
Your Community Voice

"This is for you," Brenda smiled pointedly, as she handed Imad a gift wrapped brown bag of coffee beans from her trip to Africa.

"You are always ahead of the game Brenda," Imad said as a smile filled his jolly face.

The waitress approaches.

"Do you know what you want?"

"Ask first the angel of peace," Imad says politely, referring to Brenda.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha," Brenda laughs, her brown eyes twinkling.

Then and there, at the Al-Ajami restaurant in Dearborn, a sparkling bud of friendship blooms, the connection that two people can only share when one person has the courage to reach out to someone else, no matter how unlikely it was for them, under normal circumstances to be friends.

Brenda Rosenberg is Jewish. Imad Hamad is Palestinian.

Their unlikely friendship began with an e-mail.

"I got her e-mail through many interfaith people," Imad says. "She wrote something that caught my attention and was consistent with our common devotion for dialogue and engagement."

A relationship bound to fail, you

might say. After all, they come from parts of the world where conflict is the rhythm of everyday life. So why should you get to know someone you should hate, right?

And yet, where you expect shouting, there is none. Where you expect shooting, there is none. Instead, Imad and Brenda speak with an equal measure of passion and calm for peace. And they listen -- really listen. This is what I witnessed as a fly on the wall at their latest lunch meeting:

"I think we should do a panel, or an introduction to our community," Brenda suggests to Imad.

Imad replies: "I think that it's good to entertain both ideas. People want to see other people. It's a statement for dialogue."

They're hashing out details and finding common ground for a joint project called "Engaging The Other", a conference aimed at bringing together all faith communities for dialogue this October in Dearborn. The project was created with a bold notion that their communities can be friends, not enemies.

"I'm totally optimistic," says Brenda, co-creator of the documentary "Reuniting The Children of Abraham" and interfaith activist from Birmingham.

"I believe in the world of peace, not of a world of pieces," says Imad, Director of Michigan's American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in

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Dearborn.

In the idyllic setting, it's easy to dream. But can connections at lunch stand up to the challenges of the real world? Will another war strain interfaith relations like last summer? Will another violent event overshadow Brenda and Imad's work here?

"If something happens," Imad says to Brenda, "it will take a great deal of patience and courage to deal with this conference."

But both looked at each and agreed it would be a test for everyone, and the kind of test their conference, their own bond, was formed to combat.

"I think," Brenda tells Imad, "no matter what else we do, people will see our friendship."

Imad nods in agreement: "The common good will always prevail." Eating at the same table, borders

are erased by looking beyond the daily headlines.

"We're so political with everything that we miss the human element," Brenda tells Imad.

Without hesitation, Imad replies to Brenda: "You're touching on a very important point here. At the end of the day, it comes down to trust. One demonstration that this can happen is us - the fact that we're talking. This is the example we need to promote."

If you listen closely, here is what Brenda and Imad are really saying: *Get to know me, and then judge me. Get to know me, and then choose to be afraid of me, rather than caving in to the ignorance and fear of all that is different and unknown. I do not hate you, and I do not wish your death. I am not your enemy - my people's and your people's ignorance, hatred, and fear of each other is the real enemy.*

Flip back to the picture on page 16. A Palestinian man and a Jewish woman dining together,

and discovering that they're really not that different after all. They literally see the human side of each other, and nothing looks the same. They don't see the black-and-white world of their friends, where Israelis are evil land-grabbers and Palestinians are rock-throwing terrorists. They see tolerance and understanding. They learn to trust and respect one another. They are not talking about each other, but with each other. And they're making sense.

At lunch's end, they are optimistic about the chances for everlasting peace, at least in the short term, with their fall conference. They remain hopeful and determined.

"So," Brenda inquires, "at the conference, we do not set conditions for talking."

"That's it, period," says Imad.

Brenda replies: "And we don't judge or criticize, we just listen."

Imad: "Yes, very simple. It's not

mission impossible."

Brenda: "Who would we bring to the panel?"

Imad: "You and me."

They leave lunch as they came: Smiling.

There's a saying: Governments negotiate treaties; peace is made by people. In this case, two people - out of billions.

But what's wrong with that? We all seem to dream these big dreams, as if Tinker Bell is going to swoop down from the Magic Kingdom and sprinkle her pixie dust to make us all get along overnight.

Maybe we should start with small hopes at a restaurant table with a bowl of pita chips and a dish of hummus.

It's a start. ♦

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