

Healing Rifts



Above: Brenda Rosenberg, Dr. Mazen Mtabkani, researcher in Orientalism, Saudi Arabia; Archbishop Gregorios Johanna Ibrahim, Aleppo, Syria; Grand Mufti of Tripoli and Northern Lebanon Sheik Malek al-Shaar; Dr. Abdullah Bin Fahd Al-Luhaidan, adviser to Minister of Islamic Affairs and professor of political science at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia; and Fahd Abdallah Al Ajlan, deputy editor *Al-Jazirah* newspaper, Saudi Arabia.

Brenda Rosenberg is dedicated to working locally and globally to mend interfaith relations.

Harry Kirsbaum
Contributing Writer

Among the 300 dignitaries who attended the opening of the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna, Austria, on Nov. 26 was Brenda Rosenberg, a fashion consultant from Bloomfield Hills who has fought for interfaith and intercultural dialogue since the tragedy of 9-11.

Heralded by some, criticized by others, the former vice president of fashion merchandising and marketing for Federated/Allied department stores has traveled the world and rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous. “I even dined in Monaco with Prince Rainier, in Milan with Versace, partied at Regine’s in Paris with Bernard Lanvin and at Studio 54 with Bill Blass,” she said.

The horrific events of Sept. 11, 2001, affected her deeply and motivated her to act.

“I thought, ‘What if I could take my creativity, energy, marketing and merchandizing skills and use them to help heal the pains of old and new prejudices and misconceptions between cultures and religions?’” she said. “I knew anti-Semitism would be on the rise [after 9-11]. My primary focus would be on building a new relational architecture between Jews and Arabs, including Christians. I also work with Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists.”

Her role in interfaith dialogue comes in three parts — builder of partnerships, facilitator of deeper levels of understanding and caring, and implementer of specific actions to create change.

“In 2013, my focus will be working on

college campuses, both in America and Israel, within conflict paradigms to deconstruct the conflict narratives and focus the actions of those with leadership potential toward constructive activities — creating partnerships across divides that can benefit both sides in conflict,” she said.

“Brenda does not sit idly by,” said Kari Alterman, local American Jewish Committee director. Rosenberg serves as a local AJC board officer. “Her incredible dedication to interfaith work has taken her across the globe — from Dubai, to Jordan, to Israel, to Vienna. She is invited because of her passion and seriousness for the work at hand, and for her ability to get things done.”

Making Differences Count

Rosenberg created the Tectonic Leadership Center for Conflict Transformation and Cross Cultural Communication in 2011 with Arab Muslim co-founder Samia Bahsoun of New Jersey, after they met in 2009.

“Most interfaith dialogue and peace groups focus on discussing commonalities,” Rosenberg said. “Our Tectonic Leadership focus is on talking about our differences, deepest fears, both conscious and unconscious, and conflicting beliefs that lead to conflicting interests.”

Her other interfaith projects have included the Reuniting the Children of Abraham Toolkit for Peace and the Children’s Peace Book, which she calls “wonderful first steps that continue to connect individuals and communities.”

“Unfortunately, there are still so many people who are disconnected and have never met someone they consider an other, a stranger or even their enemy,” she said.

And she has faced criticism for her out-



Left: Brenda Rosenberg; Aziz Abu Sarah, Palestinian owner of MEJDI duel narrative tours to the Middle East; Hawa Noor, University of Nairobi, communication and peace building specialist, African Council of Religious Leaders-Religions for Peace

reach.

“I feel I walk on dental floss between the communities,” she said. “As a Jewish woman who cares deeply for our Jewish community and is passionate about Israel’s survival, I had no idea what I see as bridge building would be seen as controversial, nor did I ever anticipate the severe criticism I have received.”

“I thought I would get hugs from our community, but along with some hugs I have received threats and have been spit on. Some Jews call me naive to call for cease-fire, and some of my Arab friends think I am way too soft on Israel.”

Crediting her husband, Howard, for support, Rosenberg said, “Keeping friendships on both sides of the divide has taken daring, stubborn determination and a clear vision that our hope for peace depends on

maintaining all relationships and, most importantly, creating new ones.”

Victor Begg, chairman emeritus of the Michigan Muslim Community Council, said he gets the same amount of criticism from his community.

“All of us who want peace and reconciliation face criticism,” said Begg, who has partnered with Rosenberg in interfaith relations since 9-11. “We need to do more work, need better organization and funding to get our critical message out.”

Abdulaziz Center

According to its website, “The KAICIID Center was founded to enable, empower and encourage dialogue among followers of different religions and cultures around the world.”

The board of directors represents

all major religions — Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism — and there is a 100-member advisory board. Saudi Arabia, Austria and Spain are the “founding states,” and the Holy See is the “founding observer to the center.”

The multifaith board determined that because the center was primarily backed by King Abdullah, the center be named after him.

Rosenberg agreed with the irony that the KAICIID could not be headquartered in the Saudi Kingdom because it is against the law there to practice any religion except Islam, “but one of the ways to bring change to Saudi Arabia is for Saudi leaders to meet with people of other religions and see the benefits of working and living with people of diverse religious backgrounds,” she said. “In that way, the center can help bring reform to Saudi Arabia. We will have to wait and see.”

Rosenberg said in Vienna she was able to find new partners in interfaith dialogue, among them Safi Kaskas, president of Strategic Edge, a management consulting firm based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

“Safi is bringing a group of Saudis to Auschwitz in May,” she said. “I hopefully will be joining them.”

Al Jazirah, a Saudi newspaper ran a story that featured Rosenberg and others discussing interfaith relations and the impetus for the center’s opening appeared on its Arabic website. Mona Farrokh, an official Arabic translator in Michigan and friend translated it for Rosenberg. She and others also were interviewed by news outlets Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya.

Dr. Abdullah bin Fahd Luhaidan, adviser to the Saudi minister of Islamic affairs and professor of political science at King Saud University, spoke at the meeting in Vienna of the “wise initiatives” that Saudi King Abdullah established, starting with the peace initiative of 2002 and asking for the withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories and the establishment of the state of Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital.

It troubled Rosenberg that the king criticized Israel right after 9-11, yet waited four years to make a statement at an Islamic summit in 2006 “condemning on behalf of the Muslims terrorism in all its forms, and calling for dialogue.”

“That is why these meetings are so important,” she said. “It is critical to know how different our perceptions are, and how different what is most important to each of us. What is most important is that this conference will open doors that have been closed.”



Brenda Rosenberg and Amal Al Moalimi, head of external dialogue, King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, Vienna

Malek al-Shaar, mufti of northern Lebanon, said at the center opening, “The value of this center is its mission to bring people closer to overcome obstacles and enhance dialogue and communication to all who believe in one God, the One. It also declares that all the heavenly messages came to complement each other. Says Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, ‘All creatures are children of God.’ He did not say only Muslims, but said all of creation — Jews and Christians.”

Rosenberg said, “This center can attract young leaders from all countries and communities to meet here and exchange ideas. Our young leaders have many ideas on how to overcome the challenges we face, but they do not have the financial and moral support, or the tools to put these ideas into practice and make the contributions that we urgently need in today’s world.”

Rosenberg received some criticism and praise for her work.

“Brenda’s efforts to build bridges are admirable, as there are always good people everywhere,” said Kobi Erez, executive director, Zionist Organization of America-Michigan Region.

“However, it’s vital to understand the broader root of intolerance. Peace with radical Islamic terrorists at war with Israel and the U.S. will not occur if we ignore the ideology and hatred that animates them. This does not mean all Muslims are enemies, but it does mean we have to confront the inspiration for terrorists’ hostility, and that of their enablers here and overseas, which stems from the ideology of Islamic extremism.”

Alterman of the American Jewish Committee, said, “Brenda is an incredible asset to AJC, and we value her as a regional board officer. She has helped us to strengthen interreligious relationships and open conversations.

“Brenda moves the important work of Muslim-Jewish relations forward step by step. Her dedication is tireless and inspirational.” □

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