

PROJECT ROZANA

Healing hands reach across the divide

HERE has been media coverage this week about threats reported by Muslim community leader and Belmore GP, Dr Jamal

Rifi targeting him for his cooperation with Jewish community members to support a medical charity called Project Rozana.

Rifi is a board member of this charity which supports the transport, treatment and training of Palestinian health workers for the benefit of Palestinian patients, especially children, as a result of limited services in certain medical specialties in Gaza and the West Bank.

There is only one way to respond to people who condemn enabling children to get medical and psychological care: and that is to start advocating for that care yourself.

The supporter of Project Rozana who convinced me to donate was a tiny boy called Abdallah. He lives in Hebron on the West Bank with his four siblings. Every day his mother takes him across a checkpoint into Israel for kidney dialysis. When his mother asks him to explain why he goes to Jerusalem, he says emphatically, "So that I get well. So that I live."

If Abdallah survives, it will be in part due to the goodwill of two volunteer drivers: one a young Palestinian man and the other an older Israeli Jewish woman. They are two of over 60 Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and 2000 Israelis who volunteer their time



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for the charity, Road to Recovery.

They cooperate to transport Palestinian patients to receive medical care that is not always available in the Palestinian Territories. Road to Recovery, which is supported by Project Rozana, was founded by Yuval Roth after he lost his brother in 1993 at the hands of Hamas terrorism. Roth's response to grief and trauma was to strive to make a positive difference.

In 2017, I met Roth and other Israeli members of Road to Recovery at the Gaza Crossing. I was travelling with a group of Christians and Jews on a journey hosted jointly by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies and the Uniting Church. We saw with our own eyes how this hospital transport scheme builds empathic relationships between individuals of all faiths and political views. Who doesn't want to help sick children survive?

The Palestinian section of Road to Recovery was established relatively recently and the number of its drivers is growing steadily. These drivers take the patient and family member to a checkpoint where they can enter Israel. The Israeli volunteer driver is waiting on the other side. In an ever-more polarised climate of conflict, these car trips bring so-called enemies together for



Hugh Riminton, Dr Jamal Rifi, Zeina Abdulhadi, Palestinian head of mission Izzat Abdulhadi, Ron Finkel, Dr Abdel-Rahman and Professor Esti Galili-Weisstub at the Project Rozana dinner.

Photo: Project Rozana

a humanitarian common purpose that builds friendship and respect.

It was a pleasure to see this same humanitarian impulse in Sydney in late May when 320 Muslims, Christians and Jews gathered for the Hand in Hand dinner to raise money for Project Rozana.

Nearly half the crowd was Muslim and 30 per cent were Jewish. Federal, state and local government politicians mingled with community leaders and international representatives. The event patrons were businessman and philanthropist David Gonski and NSW Shadow Minister for Education Jihad Dib. The cross-cultural warmth demonstrated by these two men, when they spoke together, set the tone for the whole evening.

Project Rozana is not only helping Palestinian children get medical attention for physical illness and

injuries. It is developing the capacity of Palestinian and Israeli clinicians to support children with PTSD as well.

Anyone who has visited the Israeli communities on the border of Gaza – as I have in 2017 and again this year with another multi-faith group hosted by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies – knows that many children sleep, wait for buses and play in bomb shelters. Children know they must run to shelters when they hear sirens. The children in Gaza and the West Bank also live with the ever-present threat of danger.

Child psychiatrist and trauma expert, Professor Esti Galili-Weisstub was interviewed by journalist Hugh Riminton at the Project Rozana dinner about her work training Palestinian and Israeli clinicians to treat post-traumatic stress in children. This joint training, in

English, at the Binational School of Psychotherapy in Jerusalem, also enables Palestinian and Israeli professionals to meet in a safe, respectful context and develop clinical partnerships. This kind of connection is all too rare in contemporary Israel.

Dr A. Abdel-Rahman, head of the Hebron-based Green Land Society for Health Development, accompanied Galili-Weisstub and spoke of his work to expand the Road to Recovery transport scheme to the West Bank. These two colleagues showed the collegiate, mutual respect that extremists of all kinds abhor.

"Normalisation" is a term of condemnation that is used to attack people and projects that seek to link people across the Palestinian and Israeli divide, even when the initiative has a clear humanitarian purpose.

Abdel-Rahman captured the essence of Project Rozana when he told the dinner guests in Sydney: "The only normalisation I support is making it normal for children to get medical care." His comment was met with warm applause.

After Project Rozana founder Ron Finkel closed proceedings, I walked out into the Sydney night, surrounded by Muslim and Jewish people mingling together, and I felt that rare commodity: hope.

Julie McCrossin is an Australian radio broadcaster, journalist, comedian, political commentator and activist for women's and gay rights.

A world of ideas for emerging leaders

IMMEDIATELY upon arriving at the airport I knew we were in for a fun ride. It was barely past dawn and an eclectic mix of Jews from diverse backgrounds anticipated each other's arrival.

Each of us enthusiastically greeted our fellow travellers who would become our cohorts for the next few days. The reason: LaunchPad. The purpose: connecting with other Jews to share, learn, engage, support, inspire, motivate, innovate, challenge, create, critique, reflect and laugh – a lot.

This annual retreat which is organised by Australian Jewish Funders (AJF) with support from the JCA and Schusterman Foundation is a phenomenal platform upon which emerging leaders exit the confines of their own work spaces or community organisations and enter into a world of ideas they might otherwise not have encountered.

Indeed, within 48 hours participants went from complete strangers to teammates seeking practical solutions to complex problems. No question was out of bounds. No topic was taboo. Participants transition from spectators to change-makers via a masterfully planned three-day program. The fully kosher-catered food was delectable but our bodily nourishment came in at a distant second to the spiritual and communal



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nourishment that was LaunchPad.

To be honest, one of the reservations I had about attending the LaunchPad retreat was investing three days of my life into what might amount to nothing more than a talk fest. But my apprehension was quickly dispelled. The group focus was to create concrete strategies to tackle real life problems affecting the community. Realistic goals and tangible action plans were carefully considered and committed to. However large the problem, however elusive the solution, this exceptional team of grassroots leaders were determined to do whatever they could to transform community "oys" to communal "joys".

Top of the list was the increasingly unaffordable cost of Jewish day school tuition. Some argued for the creation of more Jewish education within public school with large numbers of Jewish students while others proffered an education fund that would assist families on a means tested basis.

Another issue that dominated the discourse was a greater need for spiritual connection in an ever increasingly digital world, with



Shani Burnie, Rabbi Yaakov Glasman, Paul Kirschner, Alix Friedman, Stephanie Weiner and Courtney Cardin taking part in an outdoor session at Launchpad.

emphasis on organising professionally facilitated retreats for Jews of all ages to get away from the hustle and bustle of our fast-paced world and reconnect with their core.

How to lessen the stigma of gay and lesbian Jews within the Orthodox community was another pressing topic with a view to facilitating a series of meetings between congregational rabbis and Orthodox families who have a gay family member so the rabbis can better understand these families' experiences.

There were professional development sessions on how to speak so people will listen, maximising the three "R"s of volunteering – recruitment, retention and recognition, and a practical course on

how to infuse the "Jewish" into Jewish leadership.

The LaunchPad leadership team possessed a war chest of skills and talents to facilitate dialogue with a perpetual focus on outcome-oriented goals. A dose of Jewish wisdom imbued every morning and open and honest group feedback pods punctuated every evening.

Additionally, and excitingly, the program included outstanding international guest leaders who had achieved enormous success in furthering Jewish life in the United States.

Take, for example, David Cygielman. Humble, unassuming and remarkably down to earth, David has built the international network of Jewish social/educa-

tional hubs called "Moishe House" whose exponential growth has been featured in the pages of *The AJN*. From procuring his first donation of a few thousand dollars to managing a current annual budget of \$14m, David illustrated to us all that ordinary people really can become extraordinary leaders. He gave us pointers of how to best manage and grow the projects and organisations we are passionate about and inspired us to the realisation that the sky really is the limit.

As the three-day retreat came to a close I began to reflect on what I had taken from the experience. A network of new people, a kaleidoscope of new ideas and a plethora of productive experiences all sit within the mix. But the most meaningful thing for me was the human connection – the sense that despite the very different perspectives we all brought to the table, we were all intrinsically united in our goal to enhance the communities in which we live.

By enriching the Jewish pride and lived Jewish experience of its participants, LaunchPad achieved one of the central ideals of our timeless Torah – the oneness and connectedness of Am Yisrael – a gift we will all carry well into the future.

Rabbi Yaakov Glasman is senior rabbi of St Kilda Hebrew Congregation.