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 volunteered drivers: one a young Palestinian man and the other an older Israeli Jewish woman. They are two of over 60 Palestinians in the Gaza and the West Bank and 2000 Israelis who volunteer their time 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 Yvonne Rabin, whose father was born in 1993 at the hands of Hamas terrorists. Rabin's response to grief and trauma was to strive to make a positive difference.

In 2017, I met Rabi and other Israeli members of Road to Recovery at the Gaza Crossing. I was traveling 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 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 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 Diab. 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 multidisciplinary group hosted by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies – knows how 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 connects Palestinian and Israeli professionals to meet in a safe, respectful context and develop clinical partnerships. This kind of work was all too rare in contemporary Israel.

Dr A. Abdel-Rahman, head of the Hebron-based Green Land Center 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 go on a school trip.” This sentiment 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.

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

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

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

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