

Two Rhode Islanders for Peace

On the surface, it would appear that two prominent Rhode Island residents, Alan Hassenfeld of Bristol and David Maloof of Middletown, should be on opposite sides of the Israeli-Palestine debate. Hassenfeld retired chairman of Hasbro, is Jewish, while David Maloof is a Christian Arab-American. Yet the two men have a great deal in common, especially in their efforts for a peaceful solution to a 57-year old conflict.

As United States Chairman of the Jerusalem Foundation, Hassenfeld is committed to creating a pluralistic Jerusalem, one where "East and West, old and new, everything would come together, and people would live in harmony."

He became acting chairman of the Foundation in 2001, believing "very idealistically" to be part of the peace process. That, he admits, was naïve. But there have been successes. The Foundation has built community centers, homes for seniors, and parks and sponsored many cultural events. His favorite Foundation project is the Hand-in-Hand School, where all classes are half Jewish and half Arab. Each class has a Jewish and an Arab teacher, and each day they teach half in Hebrew and half in Arabic. There are two principals, one Jewish and one Arab, and the parent-teacher council is half and half.

"I have great hope," he says. "If you can bring people together, they can learn together, work together and create together. It is a model for peace. But if you can't get people to sit at the table because they are always fighting, taking land, or firing missiles, it won't work. You don't make change happen by knocking down walls. Change must come from within, and you can't force it on people. We are desperate to keep the young people in Jerusalem, not just the religious but the very bright young people who might be going to great universities."

David Maloof, a Lebanese-American, has devoted years to attaining peace for the over five million Palestinians and the over 9.1 million Israelis. Maloof grew up on Long Island, where he attended Chaminade High School, followed by Columbia University. He modeled his negotiating style on his father's law partner, James B. Donovan, the subject of the Steven Spielberg film, *Bridge of Spies*." Donovan negotiated with Fidel Castro on behalf of President John F. Kennedy following the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

Maloof, a lawyer and former investigative television reporter," went to Lebanon for the first time in the early 2000s to donate sports equipment and coach basketball in a Christian refugee camp. He has a history of working with peaceful Palestinian leaders. He and his group, Churches for Middle East Peace, developed a plan to allow the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, to address the student body at The

Cooper Union, a prestigious university in New York City. Abbas was in Manhattan to address the opening session at the United Nations in November of 2014. When word of the proposed Cooper Union speech went public, there was outrage in some quarters, including death threats. Some student supporters of Israel developed an online plan to sabotage the entire event by purchasing tickets in a block, showing up early, and walking out when President Abbas was introduced.

Maloof reached out to some of the Jewish groups who, like him, were fighting for peace. An official of a Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace lobbying group promised to have replacement students ready to walk in if the other students walked out. Students from "Seeds of Peace," an organization dedicated to bringing Israeli and Palestinian students together, also promised to attend to hear President Abbas.

There were four separate levels of security on September 22, 2014, the day of the speech. The NYPD has undercover officers in street clothes mingled in the audience. There was Federal and Palestinian Security, and The Cooper Union hired a private security firm. The auditorium did not have an empty seat when President Abbas rose to speak. The mood was tense, as no Palestinian leader had ever addressed the U.S. public before in English.

Abbas defused the crowd with his opening lines: "Just as it took courage for Abraham Lincoln to stand at this very podium to argue for the end of slavery, I am honored today to stand in front of you at this very podium where eight men who were or became American Presidents have stood and announced their programs and platforms." No one walked out as Abbas pledged non-violence, freedom of religion, equality for women, and full recognition of Israel and a Palestinian state.

While no peace deal was reached, the words of the speech still resonate with idealistic people, including Maloof, who hopes to be there when a fair and just peace between Israel and Palestine becomes reality.