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Group throws peace 'party'

■ The Eugene Middle East Peace Group members host a 'celebration' to promote peace by bringing people together

By Jenni Schultz
for the Emerald

Participating in hummus contests, dancing, singing and eating seem like improbable solutions for the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but for the Eugene Middle East Peace Group, it's the best option.

As demonstrated Sunday during their "Celebration of Courage," held at the Hilyard Community Center, the organization's primary goals are to promote peace in the Middle East and celebrate the notion that they "refuse to be enemies."

Promoting peace can at times be an uphill battle, especially in light of the recent suicide bombings and raids, but "we can't afford the privilege of giving up," said Avishai Pearlson, founding member of EMEPG.

"Because the situation is so dire, it's very clear that there is no other way," said Nir Pearlson, an Israeli army refusenik in 1989 and member of the local peace group. Although the issue of peace is very political, the group is not, Avishai said. The purpose of the group, he said, is to "forge friendships and spend time sharing with each other."

Nir said that in the beginning, their discussions were more political, but now, it's more just about hanging out with each other.

"These people are our heroes. They're our inspiration."

Michelle Holman
EMEPG member

EMEPG member Michelle Holman traveled from Deadwood, Ore., to participate in the celebration. She has been a member of the group for two months, and said she admires Avishai and Nir. "These people are our heroes," she said. "They're our inspiration."

The event planners erected a tent for people to attach pieces of cloth with wishes or prayers written on them. One wish said, "May we see the humanity in every being so that we can no longer hate our neighbors."

Lisa Fragala helped organize the event that has been planned for six weeks and was "very pleased" with the outcome and the number of people that attended. She was particularly excited about the hummus contest. "Food unites people," she said, "and hummus is something that is similar in these two cultures."

The best way to promote peace for this group is to form new bonds and relationships rather than debate or demonstrate against war.

"Just making friends is what I can do," Avishai said. "The worse it gets, the more peace seems like the only solution."

Jenni Schultz is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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