

## northwest

## Shout Out for Joy

One queer young woman's quest

by Malka Geffen

**W**hy has a young queer woman from Vancouver, Wash., committed herself to social justice work in Palestine? What can the queer community learn from her efforts and experiences?

I had these and many other questions to ask Joy Ellison when we met to discuss her recent trip to the West Bank and her upcoming trip to Bethlehem. This bright and compassionate 22-year-old, who graduated from Earlham College with a degree in peace and global studies, will be learning Arabic, living with a Palestinian family and volunteering through the Palestine Summer Encounter program.

**Malka Geffen: Why is it important to you as a young queer woman to be an activist?**

**Joy Ellison:** I think it's a matter of survival. We really don't have much of a choice in this day and age because our existence is denied as a people, and we have so many threats to our civil liberties and to human rights all over the world. We have a regime in place that's promoting militarism and economic injustice as though it's something that's a world value. As human beings of whatever flavor and variety, we simply have to be activists if our planet is going to continue.

**MG: What is it about the Palestinian situation that specifically speaks to you?**

**JE:** The Israeli military occupation of Palestine is funded by U.S. taxpayer money to the tune of about \$3 billion a year. As an American, I feel like I have an obligation to make sure my tax money is going to responsible people and responsible causes. The Israeli military occupation of Palestine is not one of those. It's something that is targeting civilians. It's perpetuating violence and injustice. It's about removing one group of people from a homeland for another group of people who also believe it's their homeland. It's not about cooperation but exclusivity.

**MG: Why is solidarity between the queer community and Palestinians important?**

**JE:** We as Americans simply cannot share the suffering of the Palestinian people, or the suffering of the Israeli people, or the suffering of any another

person. When I go through a checkpoint in the West Bank, I pull out my American passport, and generally speaking, I have no problem. I'm in a position to use that American passport to help Palestinians. I was asked to accompany a friend of mine who is 17 years old to Jerusalem because [she was] worried that without an American with her she wouldn't get in.

So solidarity can't be about believing that we share the suffering of other people. It can be about joining with people as they suffer and using our privilege in a conscious way to systemically undermine that oppression. I think that we need to get out of our own skins and our own perspectives every once in a while, and we need to put our oppression into context with other forms of oppression.

We can't be a movement that's about fund raising and giving awards to television shows. We have to be a movement about constructive nonviolence and about putting our human dignity out there for other people to attack but also to see that it's real.

**MG: Why are you going back to Palestine this summer?**

**JE:** I'm going back specifically to go to language school. I had an experience in Palestine that really changed my understanding of what I needed to do to work in the area.

Coming back from running an errand in another town, I got off the bus and saw about 20 men who'd been stopped and looked like they'd probably had their ID cards taken away from them by an Israeli soldier. I remember walking up to these men and saying: "Do any of you speak English? Do the soldiers have your ID cards?" None of them spoke English, which is a little strange in Palestine. It's really important not to walk up to a soldier on a person's behalf unless you have that person's permission. So I ended up running home to ask, "How do you say 'Do the soldiers have your ID card?' in Arabic?"

This was the point in which I realized it's time



Joy Ellison travels to Bethlehem this summer.

to go to language school. I'm really lucky that I also get to stay with a Palestinian family and get to be involved in cultural events. I'm really excited to be able to volunteer with the Holy Land Trust's non-violent training program, which does training for Palestinian trainers and also runs an Israeli/Palestinian international summer camp aimed at teaching nonviolent activism skills to high school students and young adults.

**MG: What are you most looking forward to in your upcoming trip?**

**JE:** Not the heat and the mosquitoes! I love Palestine. People always look at me very strangely when I say that. I will be glad to be back and see old friends. The food in Palestine is phenomenal. Everyone should go to Palestine because of the ethic of hospitality and the fact that you'll be fed all day long.

**MG: What's the most common question you've heard since your return last year?**


**JE:** Probably the most common question was, "Weren't you so scared?" To which the answer is, "Not as scared as you might think, and not scared of what you might expect." I have never been afraid of Palestinian people because I never posed a threat to them that I'm aware of. Occasionally I have been frightened by Israeli soldiers and also Israeli settlers who tend to be more ideologically based

and more willing to use violence against internationals because they have very few constraints and because they feel more passionately their cause than some soldiers.

Generally I feel so much more worried for the physical safety of any Palestinians I am with that it's easier to ignore my own fear. Most people know so little about the situation. You can tell they have questions but that they're hardly able to express them. I think that's the real tragedy. I think part of it is that people are afraid of saying something that is anti-Semitic or saying something that will support terrorism in some way.

George Bush has been really effective in this philosophy that "If you're not with us, then you're with the terrorists." And that's just paralyzing our ability to understand the situation.

**MG: How will you share what you'll learn this summer with your community?**

**JE:** I've talked to about 12 different high school classrooms, and that's where I find the greatest number of queer folks and people who are able to identify with the stories I tell. I would really love to continue talking with youth groups. I'm always looking for opportunities to speak. I'm especially happy to speak with GLBTQ folks. 

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