



# the First Step

the journey to change begins in Ames

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The only thing between a Palestinian family's home and an enormous, roaring Israeli bulldozer was a slender American woman. As the bulldozer approached, 23-year-old Rachel Corrie knelt down to show she wasn't moving. The bulldozer continued in her direction, its blade down, pushing a growing pile of earth toward the woman. Rachel stood as the machine neared and climbed onto the pile of dirt it was pushing, only to lose her balance and fall. She was instantly trapped beneath the pile of soil, and her small body was crushed by the weight of the raging machine as it drove over her. Rachel died on March 16, 2003 in Israel, but her message has since drifted from the Middle East to Ames.

Rachel dedicated her life to promoting peace in the world, beginning in Israel, as a peace activist with the International Solidarity Movement. Despite her death, she is still making a difference. Thousands of miles from the Middle East, a film series in Ames dedicated to Rachel is

prompting discussion and promoting understanding of the Israeli conflict. The film series, "Palestine Unabridged," seeks to illustrate the humanity of the conflict in Israel from a Palestinian perspective. About 150 people gather every other Thursday night at the Ames Public Library to view a selected film. On the following Thursdays, about 40 people meet at Cafe Diem to discuss their reaction to the film and their thoughts on the conflict.

At the discussions, the people sit in a circle. The mediator, standing on stage, calls on each person who has a concern to share. When it's her turn, an American woman stands up and shows a diorama she made representing Palestinian olive groves. She explains that Israeli soldiers often destroy the olive groves, decimating a large source of Palestinian income. An Israeli woman immediately raises her hand and waits to be called on by the mediator. She explains that Israeli forces only destroy olive groves because Palestinians hide in them and shoot at Israeli troops. Some members of the discussion group loudly reject her comments, but Pnina Luban stands behind her statement.

Pnina Luban, like many of the people attending the film series, has a very direct interest in the conflict. Luban, an Ames resident for over 20 years, was born in Israel and lived in the middle of this raging dispute until she was 23. The conflict was a looming presence throughout her childhood. Even as a little girl, she always checked under bus seats for suitcases that could contain bombs. "The emotions I remember as a child were feelings of fear and threat that Israel was being attacked. It wasn't even about the sovereignty of the country, it was about human life." Some of Luban's family, including her mother and siblings, still live in Israel.

Like many of the Israelis attending the series, Luban is skeptical about the content of the films. To her, they give a distorted view of life in Israel and demonize the Israeli people and military. While she believes many people are attending the series with good intentions, she doesn't think these films and discussions are promoting positive interaction. "It's not getting us any closer to peace and understanding. It's not enhancing understanding. It's enhancing hatred."



Bill from Des Moines"

Even before the films were ever shown, the library started receiving complaints about their content. Lynne Carey, library employee in charge of "Palestine Unabridged," said people complained that the films weren't true and were staged by actors. The library was also attacked for only airing one side of the conflict: the Palestinian side. And Carey will be the first to admit those complaints are entirely accurate. "That is true. We are only showing one perspective, the Palestinian perspective, but we are open to ideas about showing more perspectives." She said the Ames library is trying to fulfill a need in the community and show a view that exists among Ames citizens. "We're doing exactly what libraries are asked to do, upholding intellectual freedom and fighting censorship."

Many attendees welcome the focus on the conflict from the Palestinian perspective. Bill now lives in Des Moines, but he was born in Palestine. However, he's very secretive about his current identity as well as the details of his past. In fact, Bill isn't even his real name. When he signs up for the discussion groups, he simply writes "Bill from Des Moines."

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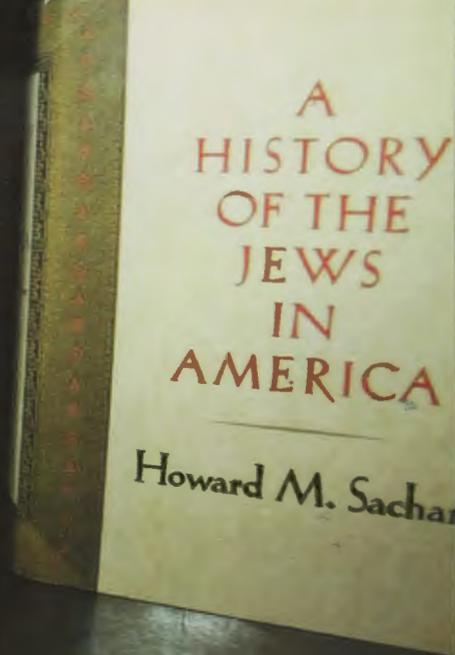
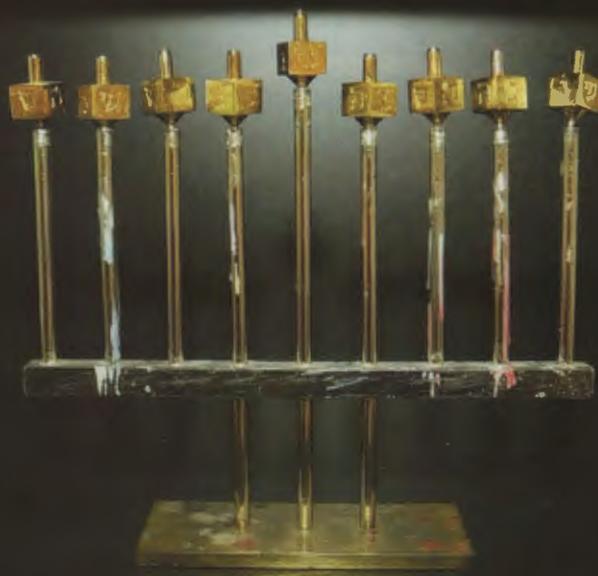
## **"It's not enhancing understanding. It's enhancing hatred."**

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Bill feels the Palestinian perspective is rarely shown in American media. To him, the film series is a fairly accurate portrayal of the Palestinian situation in Israel, though the videos may still understate the destruction Palestinians actually face. He would like to resolve the conflict and reach peace with all people at the discussions, even the Israeli people.

The film series is impacting many residents without direct ties to the conflict. Ursula von Godany, an Ames resident for over 30 years, was born in Yunic, Germany. She was just a teenager when the Holocaust began, and she remained in Germany with her family throughout the duration of World War II. A thick German accent is obvious in her soft voice as she admits she was fearful of how she would be received at the films and discussions because of her background. But still she comes. She sits attentively in her chair, her coat still on, her silver hair neatly in place, and waits patiently for this week's discussion to begin.

Everyone is given an opportunity to provide their views at the discussion in hopes the participants can reach a common ground and understanding. The mediator advises all in attendance to try to understand



others first and then strive to be understood. von Godany attends because she wants to learn more about a conflict she doesn't know a lot about. Exploring this dispute is helping her expand her views. She came into the films wanting to think good thoughts about the Jewish people, some of whom are her friends.

Despite complaints from Ames residents that the library is brainwashing viewers with false films, von Godany has maintained her convictions and beliefs throughout the series. And yet, she's managed to learn much from the films. The films haven't changed her thoughts about the Jewish people, but they have led her to want to learn even more about the conflict. Watching the conflict brings her pain, but

doesn't instill any radical beliefs. "I don't make a judgment about [all Jewish people] from just this experience. These people that do bad things maybe are not the same people I know." Von Godany said she would also support the library offering another perspective, perhaps the Israeli one, so people can further their knowledge on issues of the world.

The film series provides some insight into the Israeli conflict for other participants not as familiar with the situation. Rachel Corrie's relatives have been attending the film series to gain background on the Palestinian people Rachel lost her life defending. Before each film begins, the announcer reads a quote from Rachel's journal from her time in Israel that speaks directly to their hearts. "I don't know if many of the children here have ever existed without tank-shell holes in their walls and the towers of an occupying army surveying them constantly from the near horizons. I think, although I'm not entirely sure, that even the smallest of these children understand that life is not like this everywhere." Then, the film begins. Rachel's family sits together in a row quietly, their eyes fixated on the screen, trying to absorb every scene and understand a conflict they've never experienced. The series has been an enlightening experience for Bill Pusateri, Rachel's uncle from Iowa City. "It's really a great way to see how everyone comes with a different perspective and then brings their own life experiences into it."

As the film series and discussions continue, the people attending them will strive for understanding and peace of mind. All participants reach their own conclusions from the perspectives provided. "The Ames community is sophisticated enough to see them and then evaluate them," says Lynne Carey. "This is only one piece of information, and they can get more." When "Palestine Unabridged" is over, change is only beginning. These films and discussions may not solve the problems in Israel, but by providing a different perspective and bringing together individuals from both sides of the conflict, the series is definitely helping people take a step in the right direction. e

