

The Compassionate Listening Project

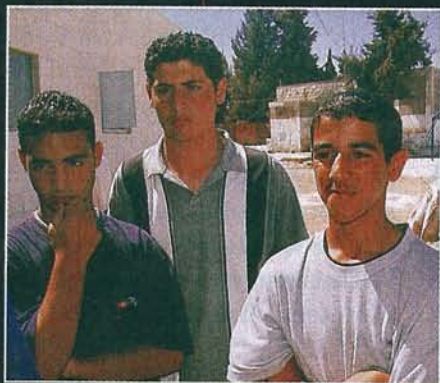
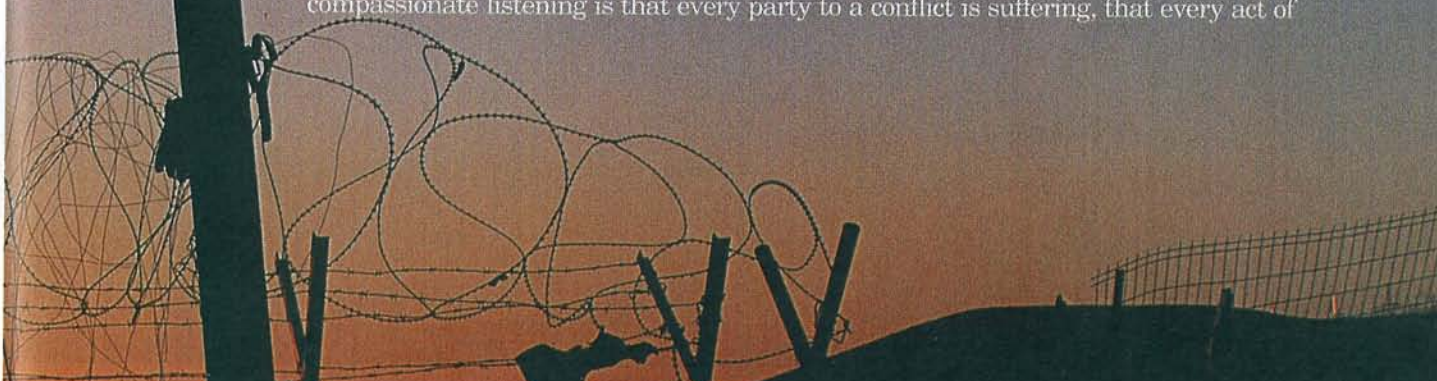
*LEAH GREEN'S INTERNATIONAL DELEGATIONS ARE
HELPING ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS LEARN
HOW TO LISTEN TO EACH OTHER.*



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DEBORAH ROHAN SCHLUETER

The world is becoming more aware that the traditional methods used to end violent conflicts are rarely effective in the long run. The ill-fitting solution used to end one war inevitably becomes the seed and lifeblood of the next. We can see the unsolved past in the odd and unworkable boundaries that separate nations, creative scribbles drawn on maps in an effort to preserve the peace. But is that type of peace sustainable? Armistices with clear victors and demoralized losers are often delayed beginnings; the deep wounds that are buried rather than healed often resurface within one or two generations with ferocious strength and stamina.

Leah Green is one woman working for more effective solutions to resolving conflicts, even the big ones. She began her work in the 1980s with perhaps the most intractable crisis in modern history, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Employing a seemingly mild but powerfully effective tool termed *compassionate listening*, she is leading Palestinians, Israelis, Americans, and others through a quiet yet dramatic process of listening to one's enemy to initiate healing. She explains, "The fundamental premise of compassionate listening is that every party to a conflict is suffering, that every act of



BACKGROUND: SUNSET IS DRAMATIC AT A CHECKPOINT THAT MONITORS ENTRANCE INTO JERUSALEM FROM THE WEST BANK. LEFT TO RIGHT: ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS OF ALL AGES GET A CHANCE TO EXPRESS THEIR OPINIONS ABOUT TENSIONS IN THE AREA WHEN LEAH GREEN (FAR RIGHT) AND HER TEAM OF LISTENERS COME TO TOWN.

violence comes from an unhealed wound." Although the uninitiated may interpret the work as solely a feel-good measure, Green, like her mentor, the international peacemaker Gene Knudsen Hoffman, has witnessed profound changes.

Green first saw the potential of bringing enemies together to listen to one another when she left her home in the United States for

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bringing facilitators from the village to conduct programs at the university. As Green described it, "Those listening circles were so incredibly effective that I was pro-

nately, today everything in Israel is built around keeping people apart, and the separation wall Israel is building is a physical manifestation of that."



a year of college in Israel. Along with her studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, she also enrolled in a facilitator-training course at Neve Shalom/Wahat as Salaam, a village in Israel established by Jews and Palestinian Arabs to increase understanding between the two peoples. Seeing small but substantial changes in Arab-Jewish relationships among her friends on campus, she began

foundly influenced, and that set me on a track. So-called peace movements are often very good at identifying what they are *against*, and many times their efforts increase the level of polarization in the world. I just knew that for me, my path was to build bridges and not to add to the hatred in the world. I felt that if people could hear each other as human beings they could work it out. Unfortu-

In September 2003 I joined Green as a member of her twentieth delegation of "citizen-diplomats"; we went on a two-week journey throughout Israel and the West Bank, two places most individuals choose not to visit. That is precisely the reason to go there: it is where listening and reconciliation are so desperately needed. With twenty-two participants (nineteen Americans, one Ger-

man, and one Croat), Green, her cofacilitator Martin Dronsfield, and local Israeli and Palestinian support staff conducted twenty-four listening circles. Some sessions were short; others lasted hours. Our stay in the Deheisha refugee camp took nearly two days and involved scores of speakers. We visited Palestinian farmers literally locked inside their villages by roadblocks and the new security fence/wall (it varies ac-

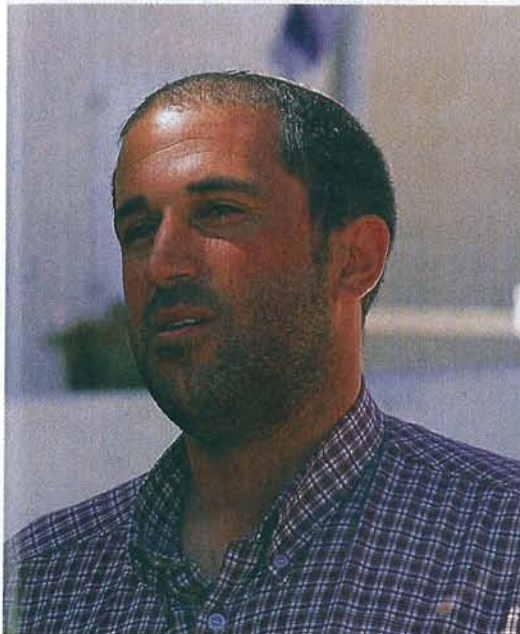
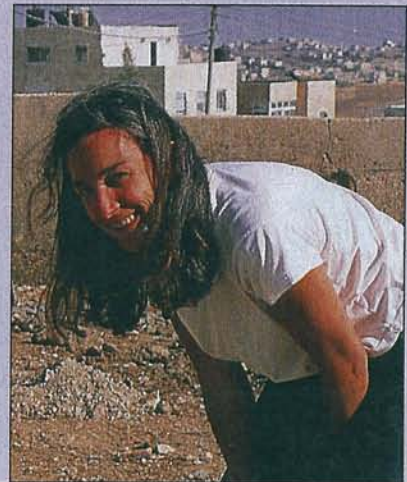
The Beginnings

Leah Green became concerned with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict while living in Israel during the 1980s. Wanting to take an active role in helping ease the pain there, she formalized her efforts in 1990 by initiating a project known as Mideast Citizen Diplomacy. Within the structure of Earthstewards Network, an international NGO focused on conflict resolution, Leah secured an \$8,000 grant from the Greenville Foundation and began taking American citizen delegations to learn about the conflict firsthand.

After seven years and several delegations, Leah discovered a tool known as "compassionate listening," a process that requires questions that are nonadversarial and listening that is nonjudgmental. Armed with a better approach to healing, she formed the nonprofit Compassionate Listening Project in 1997; since then, she has seen the organization and the process thrive. Today the organization is funded primarily through revenues from its projects, small grants, and private donations, which average around \$100.

-D.R.S.

LEAH GREEN, FOUNDER OF THE COMPASSIONATE LISTENING PROJECT, BREAKS GROUND FOR A PEACE GARDEN DEDICATED TO RACHEL CORRIE.



FAR LEFT: A YOUNG PALESTINIAN GIRL'S DANCE ABOUT HER HOPE TO RETURN TO HER GRANDPARENTS' HOMELAND REFLECTS STRENGTH AND DETERMINATION. LEFT: THIS PALESTINIAN WOMAN OFTEN VISITS HER GRANDDAUGHTER WHO LIVES IN AN AREA OF FREQUENT CLASHES. RIGHT: A JEWISH ISRAELI SETTLER DESCRIBES THE MANY OBSTACLES HE FACED WHEN TRYING TO BUILD HIS HOUSE IN A PREDOMINATELY PALESTINIAN SECTION OF EAST JERUSALEM.

ording to location) and met with political leaders inside their private quarters.

On one day we split into groups of two or three and spent the night with families in the violence-ridden city of Hebron, surreal with its near-empty streets and abandoned houses and shops. The overnight stay allowed us to hear the experiences of those who have lived this conflict their entire

lives, to move beyond the listening stage and actually take in their daily existence. For many of us, this was one of the more powerful and troubling experiences of our journey, due in part to the conversations we engaged in, but also to the intensity of the danger. In Hebron, Israeli soldiers struggle daily to keep some measure of peace in the face of the hatred that regularly flares between

Israelis and Palestinians.

For fourteen days we crisscrossed the land, moving back and forth over the imaginary "green line" that separates Israel and the West Bank. We heard Palestinian mothers who were terrified and helpless when they learned that their children had thrown stones at Israeli soldiers and a Jewish father whose son was killed in a suicide bombing one year ago. He is now part of

tween. From the angry and hateful to the optimistic and forgiving, all were given ample time to express themselves.

On September 28, 2003, the third anniversary of the beginning of the second Intifada, the autumn air was hot, dry, and oppressive. Somehow it seemed suitable for our members to dig our hands into the rocky soil of Wadi Hummous, a Palestinian neighborhood not far from Jerusalem. We went there to

That evening would present a different face, a different perspective, and another challenge as we tried, sometimes desperately, to make sense of all we were seeing and hearing. Gathered in the library at the Three Arches YMCA in Jerusalem, we heard Ester Golan, a child of the Holocaust, tell of her arrival in 1945 and why Israel was her only refuge in the world. She explained that as Jews living in Germany,



Neighbors, a Jewish/Palestinian dialogue group in Galilee. We listened to a Palestinian priest (Eastern rite Catholic) devoted to peace efforts between Jews and Arabs, kibbutz members who lost five residents in a murderous attack inside their homes, Israeli soldiers and settlers, a Sufi sheik, children, and rabbis. We listened to people on the right, the left, the center, and everywhere in be-

visit families whose homes had been bulldozed by the Israeli army; meet Cindy and Craig Corrie, the visiting parents of Rachel Corrie, an American run over as she attempted to prevent a house demolition in Gaza; and to help plant a peace garden in Rachel's honor. Like every other day during this trip, tears fell and hearts broke while more unanswerable questions arose.

her parents had tried desperately to flee the country after the 1938 Kristallnacht, finding no refuge. In time they managed to send her brother to Palestine as part of the Youth Aliya program. But Ester, too underweight to make the long sea voyage, was denied the opportunity to go.

Soon after, her father was taken to a concentration camp. With the situation worsening, her

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mother grew desperate to send her children out of the country to safety. Eventually she succeeded, finding Ester a spot on a kinder-

transport to England. Alone at the age of fifteen, she landed in an orphanage where she lived until the end of the war. Her mother wrote

cast as she told her tale, but she relaxed as she explained how she later reunited with her brother and sister. Between the siblings they now have a close family, with children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren living in Israel. But pain showed again on her face when she explained that her grandson, an Israeli soldier, was killed in a battle



FAR LEFT: DELEGATES HOPING TO VISIT YASSER ARAFAT WAIT IN A BOMBED-OUT HOLDING AREA OF HIS COMPOUND.

LEFT: RACHEL CORRIE'S PARENTS AND HER BEST FRIEND TALK ABOUT THEIR JOURNEY THROUGH THE REGION.

ABOVE: JEWISH STUDENTS WALK DOWN THE VIA DOLOROSA SINGING SONGS ABOUT REBUILDING THE TEMPLE ON THE DOME OF THE ROCK. **RIGHT:** MEN PRAY AT THE WAILING WALL, THE ONLY REMNANT OF THE JEWISH TEMPLE THAT REMAINS INTACT.

to her regularly, promising to reunite the family. Each letter ended with these words: "In Palestine, that's where we'll meet again." Fortunate to find passage on the first boat to Palestine after the war ended a few years later, Ester searched for her mother for months before finally discovering that she was among the many who had perished in Auschwitz.

Ester's face had been down-

with Palestinians in 2002. Despite her losses, Ester is working to bring peace between Jews and Arabs, experiencing so personally the suffering caused by hatred between peoples.

One might ask how the listening delegation actually helped those whose stories they heard. Green, who by now has taken hundreds of delegates to listen to thousands of people, explains: "It is a

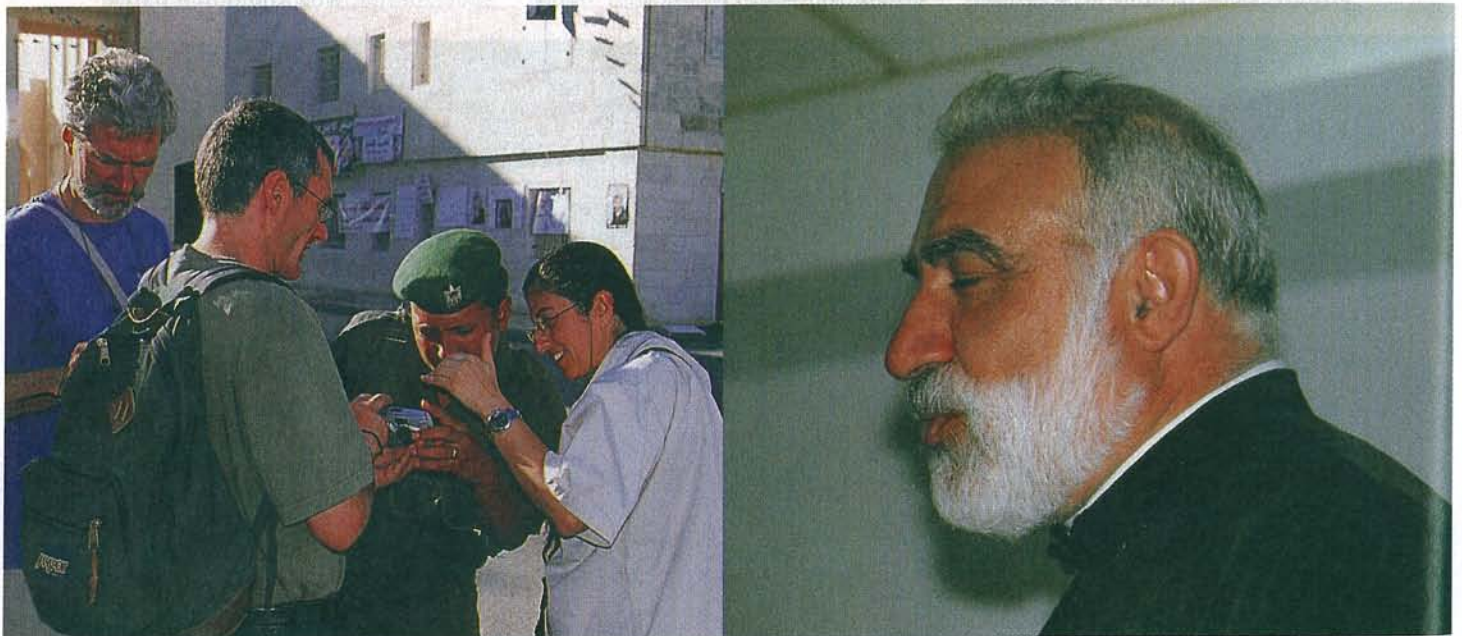
"Our job as peacemakers is to hear the grievances of all parties and find ways to tell each side about the humanity and suffering of the other."

reconciliation effort. Our job as peacemakers is to hear the grievances of all parties and find ways to tell each side about the

that listening becomes a challenge." She encourages members of the delegation to "see through the masks often worn by the

been helping their participants create a climate for peace, Green knows that the ultimate task is for Palestinians and Israelis to listen compassionately to one another.

"We currently have Americans working to train both Palestinians and Israelis to facilitate their own workshops in compassionate listening, and a grant



humanity and suffering of the other."

Listening respectfully to all sides can be a very tall order, particularly when the viewpoints being expressed diametrically oppose one's own views. Delegates learn quickly that it is far easier to listen to those they agree with, a fact Green learned to deal with long ago. "It is when we listen to those with whom we disagree, those we hold as our 'enemies,'

speakers, to see beyond their fear, to see beyond their hostility, to the person within." This process is not a passive task; it necessitates moving beyond one's firmly held beliefs. Green, along with her cofacilitators, taught us to be present with another person's pain. "Listening does not mean agreement. One can listen and be present. Often that is all that is needed for healing to occur."

While the delegations have

from the Threshold Foundation is helping us move the dream forward," Green said, adding that "those who have already been trained are conducting the most cutting-edge, bridge-building dialogues in the area."

While many are discouraged by the seemingly catastrophic situation and the dismal early results of the U.S. "road map," she remains optimistic. When I asked her how she manages to stay mo-

tivated, she didn't hesitate for a moment. "While I see the manifestation of the outer fear growing larger, for example with the new separation wall going up, I also see deeper personal change taking place within many people in the area." She referred to the many Palestinian/Israeli dialogue groups we met with that are starting to grow and to Father Emile Shoufani, the Palestinian

priest who was recently awarded the UNESCO peace prize for taking five hundred Arabs and Jews to Auschwitz. Green describes Shoufani's contribution as the ultimate in compassionate listening: "He is giving a gift to the Jews in Israel. As he put it, 'We Palestinians understand your suffering. You came to this land very broken, and now it is time for us natives to understand the root of

for the other's truth—is one answer for healing old wounds. "When you give the gift of listening, you can expect reciprocity. This all helps create a climate and build a foundation for peace. There is no military solution. We must continue our work to build real bridges between these two peoples who ultimately want the same thing: security, justice, and lasting peace." ■



FAR LEFT: ONE OF ARAFAT'S GUARDS CHECKS OUT A DIGITAL PHOTO OF HIMSELF. **LEFT:** FATHER SHOUFANI, A PALESTINIAN PRIEST, EMOTIONALLY DESCRIBES HIS EFFORTS IN DEALING WITH THE ROOT OF PAIN. **ABOVE:** A RECENTLY BULLDOZED PALESTINIAN HOME NEAR JERUSALEM. **RIGHT:** AFTER ISRAELI SOLDIERS ORDER PALESTINIAN TEACHERS TO CLOSE THE SHUTTERS ON WINDOWS OF THEIR SCHOOL THAT OVERLOOK AN ISRAELI HIGHWAY, A HAND REACHES OUT TO MAKE THE PEACE SIGN. THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE.

your pain. Let us give this gift and see what happens.'" One early response to the May 2003 trip is intriguing: the same group that visited Auschwitz, including several high-ranking Israeli officials, is making plans to travel to an Arab country to learn more about Arab history and culture.

Green smiles when she talks about Shoufani's successful effort, citing it as evidence that compassionate listening—holding a place

For further information on Compassionate Listening delegations, workshops, and related material, visit www.compassionatelisting.org.

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