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Friday November 14, 2003

Photos show the human 'heart' of the intifada

by alexandra j. wall
staff writer

A few years ago, Maurice Levitch hired Beverly Duperly Boos to photograph an architectural project he had completed.

A Berkeley-based architect, Levitch is an American Jew who describes himself as "definitely a supporter of Israel." As the two were talking, it came up that Boos was soon headed "to Palestine."

"Just hearing that she was going to Palestine got me turned off," said Levitch. From his experience, when he heard people use that word, it usually meant that they were anti-Israel.

The two went to lunch, and Boos told Levitch she had some portraits of people she had photographed on her first visit to the Middle East, on her laptop. Would he like to see a few? He said he would.

"I had an immediate reaction," Levitch said. "Whether they were Jews, Israelis or Palestinians, they were just like me."

Levitch is now a sponsor of these photos, which will soon show in the Bay Area.

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Portraits of those whose lives are touched daily by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are part of a traveling photography exhibit called "Opening of the Heart," sponsored by the Compassionate Listening Project. The exhibit will open Saturday, Nov. 15 at the Osher Marin Jewish Community Center, with community events around it continuing into January. Then, it will show in Berkeley and San Francisco.

The Compassionate Listening Project was founded by Leah Green in 1996, based on the premise of people-to-people diplomacy.

Green, who is Jewish and grew up in Alamo and Danville, first visited Israel in 1979, when she was 19. Though Green knew nothing about the Middle East conflict,

her first encounter with

a Palestinian left her

terrified.

"I had absorbed it from my synagogue, my Jewish community, my Jewish American upbringing and by osmosis," she said. But obtaining a master's degree in Middle Eastern studies made her want to hear the narrative of both sides.

"Once I did, I heard hardly any overlap," she said. "How do you bring people together and build peace when people have such completely different experiences and understandings of history?"

Her group has sent 17 delegations — 350 Jewish American leaders and American citizens — to the Middle East. This year, the project expanded to include Syria and Lebanon, and training for Israeli and Palestinian facilitators.

"We come from a culture of debate, and making the other wrong," said Green. "The act of true listening is not simple at all because we have to put our own judgements aside and truly honor the other without needing to change

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them.”

Photographer Boos, 42, who lived in Mill Valley for five years, recently moved to Bainbridge Island, Wash. Before going to the Middle East on this assignment in 2001, she had never traveled to the region. In two visits, Boos took more than 4,000 photos of several hundred people. So far, 18 have been made into large panels for the exhibit, with the hopes that eventually — depending on funding — there will be a total of 29. Each panel is accompanied by a short description of those in the photos, plus some of their own words.

Boos shared one story that seemed to epitomize her time there.

She had left her 10-year-old daughter with some relatives in Jamaica to return to the Middle East in the summer of 2001 to take more photos.

In the West Bank town of Dura, she photographed Marwa al-Sharif, a 10-year-old Palestinian girl who had been struck weeks earlier by a stray Israeli bullet that ricocheted into her head while she was sleeping. Without surgery, she would die within weeks.

Boos felt she had to do something. She organized a press conference in Bethlehem, to tell of al-Sharif's plight.

But “at the literal moment my appeal for Marwa was about to start, a bomb went off at Sbarro Pizza in Jerusalem. All the press abandoned this and went to the scene of the bombing, and I went too.”

A suicide bomber had killed 15 Israelis, 10-year-old Yocheved Shushan among them. Her 15-year-old sister, Miriam, was severely wounded, and Boos photographed her within two days. The victim lay in her hospital bed, her body pieced together and held with metal stays.

Boos visited the family repeatedly during the

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seven days of shiva, and went to Yocheved's grave.

As Boos sat shiva with the family, "I contemplated the triangle of these 10-year-olds: Yocheved who died and Marwa with the bullet in her head and my daughter who was having a wonderful summer. It struck me that these little girls represent a thread running through everything."

(Al-Sharif is fine now, largely thanks to Boos. With help, she was able to arrange surgery for al-Sharif in Connecticut, where a pediatric brain surgeon and anesthesiologist donated their services.)

While taking these photographs brought Boos closer to the conflict than she ever thought possible, viewing them can also have that kind of transformative power, Green believes.

"Looking into someone's eyes creates such a powerful connection," she said.

Green is encouraging school groups especially to view the exhibit.

"Some people feel because of the conflict they have to choose sides, but we're trying to say that there's a third way," said Green. "There's a way to stand for both sides, for all sides."

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