

## Remarks by Helen Schary Motro, June 26, 2002

### Common Ground Awards for Mideast Journalism

During the last black week in Israel five babies arrived at the pediatric intensive care unit in Wolfson Hospital near Tel-Aviv, all of them close to death. But none were the children you read about in the headlines. All these babies were born with heart defects so severe that without surgery none would survive. This week each is going through a complicated operation. All five are Palestinian - three from Gaza and two from the West Bank. Some of them have already been to this hospital before, diagnosed in the clinic which treats Palestinian children every Tuesday. Their parents or grandparents came too, and will stay with them throughout their months in the hospital.

They are among the 150 Palestinian children who have undergone cardiac surgery performed since 1995 by the Israeli organization Save a Child's Heart. The staff comprises both Jews and Arabs, and the babies lie in the cardiac unit among Jewish babies who, like they, are fighting for their lives.

Neither these babies nor those who treat them ever reach the limelight. Last Tuesday morning when three of them arrived in the hospital and were rushed to be connected to oxygen, the headlines screamed of other children not too far away, children who seemed luckier because they were born with healthy hearts. But, on a simple bus ride to school, they met a brutal untimely death.

Like many other people, I often feel overwhelmed by the endless calamities. Twenty months ago I wrote about the first child victim of this Intifada, whose Palestinian father it was my privilege to know. Now, after so much bloodletting, who can keep all the tragedies straight?

But I want to impress upon you that in Israel now there are people who, when they talk of building walls, the walls they mean are walls between the leaking chambers of a baby's heart. The knives they wield are scalpels. Their battle plans are recovery.

Physicians for Human Rights is another Israeli organization engaged in health care with Palestinians. The Jewish and Arab doctors in Physicians for Human Rights maintain ties with their colleagues in Palestinian hospitals. Every Saturday on their day off a volunteer team of doctors sets up a mobile clinic in West Bank villages, bringing medicines and treatment. Ten days ago, for example, six Israeli physicians - an internist, two family doctors, a surgeon, an orthopedist and a pediatrician - arrived in the village of Deir Balout near Nablus. On that day they gave care to 370 patients and arranged follow-up treatment within Israel for nine with severe problems.

Physicians for Human Rights and Save a Child's Heart are not alone. Despite the understandable breakdown of cooperation budding in so many fields just a few years ago, other Israelis and Palestinians continue to bravely work together. For doctors it is perhaps

easier because what they do is concrete. Contacts built on words are more fragile. For people no longer believe in words.

Still there are those of incredible courage, like the hundreds of Palestinian and Israeli parents who belong to the Bereaved Families Forum. All of them have had their own children killed by the other side. Now when they meet they must travel all the way to London, because face-to-face encounters in the Middle East are not possible today. For the rest of their lives these parents will suffer from wounded hearts no surgeon can heal. But instead of crying in dark rooms or joining the ranks of hatred, they, like the doctors, are hoping to give other children a future. Sometimes people even do things that in other circumstances would be considered normal. A week ago today in between the bombings a group of 18 Palestinian and Jewish teenagers in Jerusalem put on the circus performance they had trained together for all year. After their enthusiastic show before a mixed audience, a 16 year old trapeze artist was asked if she could suggest any solutions to the Palestinian and Israeli leaders. Her quick and simple response: "Maybe they should join the circus."

In my work I try to expose through examples like these - that in the midst of horror and hate there is still contact and caring.

A lot has been said about courage here tonight. Believe me, I am far from courageous. I write what I do because I am afraid, afraid for all of us. I see trying to reach common ground as the only way out.

We don't hear much about hope these days. But if there is any hope left, these real unsung people are at its vanguard. Poet Jay Ladin has written: "Wherever there is a chasm there will also be a bridge". We must resist despairing from the darkness of our chasm.

Instead we must dedicate ourselves to the building of that bridge.  
If we will it, it is no dream.