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Anti-war activist pushes Palestinian cause

By Lou Manzo

When most people retire, they expect life to get a bit easier and a bit better. For some, retirement means moving to Florida and playing golf five days a week on a par three course. For others it means staying close to home and spending more time with the grandkids. For Jeffrey Klein, retirement took a different turn.

"And then they threw this at me," Klein said as he lifted a tear gas grenade that Israeli soldiers had lobbed at him earlier in the month.

Retirement has taken Klein a long way from his former job as a machinist on Deer Island, though he would claim the shift has been more geographic than ideological.

"When I was a union leader with SEIU [Service Employers Industrial Union] one of the principles of the union was, 'An injury to one is an injury to all.' I think that principle doesn't stop at the union or necessarily the country," said Klein.

Since retiring, Klein has focused on educating Dorchester residents about what he has seen on his three trips to Palestine. He speaks of Israeli walls separating people from their lands and families being killed by American bombs. From these experiences, Klein has become active in working with Dorchester Muslims to educate them about their civil rights.

Working in the mosques and protesting in Palestine may appear strange to some because of Klein's background. Not to Klein, however.

"No particular people have a claim on my consciousness. I don't identify with tribalism where I have to care more about one set of people than another," said Klein.

In fact, Klein, who is Jewish, says Israel's insistence on a tribal identity drives him to tell Dorchester residents about Palestine.

"I don't have much of a Jewish identity personally but Israel doesn't see it that way. Israel says all that they are doing in Palestine is for my benefit, so I have to stand up and say 'no,'" said Klein.

Klein hopes to continue telling Dorchester about the suffering of the Palestinian people. Whether speaking in churches, civic meetings, or schools, Klein seeks to spread news about the state of the Palestinian people.

Last month, Klein made his third trip to Palestine, where he participated in a number of demonstrations protesting the Israeli occupation of Palestine. On one occasion in the town of Bil'in, Klein marched with Palestinians and a few Israelis to protest the construction of the Israeli border wall, which the Israeli government says it is building on the grounds of self-defense.

In Bil'in, the wall separates Palestinian farmers from their fields. Every week, protesters try to climb the wall to reach those fields. While Klein was participating in one such demonstration, Israeli soldiers shot tear gas grenades into the crowd. After the grenade discharged its noxious contents, Klein picked it up and smuggled the empty casing back into the United States with him.

"The grenade was made in Wyoming, it turned out. How ironic," said Klein.

Klein is a member of Dorchester People for Peace. The group was formed in 2000 during the run-up to the Iraq war, and the organization continues to focus on ending the Iraq war.

"We're setting up meetings with [U.S.] Representatives [Stephen] Lynch and [Michael] Capuano. Right now, we're trying to get people to re-think the war. It's communities like Dorchester that pay the price for war," Klein said.

Besides advocating for an end to the war, the organization is also working with other groups, such as Project Hip-Hop, on different agendas. As part of President Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, schools were forced to turn over the contact information of their students to the military. Parents retained the right to block the release of that information, but that fact, says Klein, was not widely publicized. Dorchester People for Peace, along with Project Hip-Hop, worked to inform parents of their right to privacy for their children.

"The military targets minorities and the poor. We do counter recruiting," said Klein. Now all parents in Dorchester public high schools receive a card in the mail that allows them to opt-out of being contacted by military recruiters.

Klein hopes his work in Dorchester and his experience in Palestine will help to shape U.S. policy that will be more effective in the Middle East.

"We [Dorchester People for Peace] were active in the start opposing the [Iraq] war. Some people knew before hand that it was not going to be a just cause. People needed to have their eyes open, though. Now it's the same way in Palestine. People need to have their eyes open to the real situation," said Klein. Next summer Klein hopes to return to the region where he has made relationships over the last three years.

"To change U.S. policy is my mission but it's the personal connections that sustain me in Palestine," said Klein. "We [DPP] are just trying to do what we can in our little corner of the world here in Dorchester," said Klein.

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