



Husamuddin Akhras has a smile he wants to share with everyone.

# Aloha Peace House

*Palestinian Husamuddin Akhras uses the Hawaiian principles of ho'oponopono and non-violent conflict resolution to help children learn to love and not to hate.*

## Joan Rose Magee

*My heart is capable of every form,*

*A cloister of a monk,*

*A temple for idols,*

*A pasture for gazelles,*

*The votary's Kaaba,*

*The tablets of the Torah,*

*The Koran.*

*Love is the creed I hold:*

*Wherever his camels turn,*

*Love is my creed and faith.*

—ABU BAKR IBN AL-'ARABI

The day after yet another suicide bombing in Israel, Husamuddin Akhras and I sit in a café in Maui.

"The suicide bombings bother me a lot, and it bothers me a lot that the world is not reacting to this. I still prefer to focus on more positive news," he says, looking out on the crowded street in Kahului.

Akhras, a Palestinian, is the founder of the Aloha Peace House, a Hawaiian nonprofit organization. The Aloha Peace House has ties with a camp on the Big Island where Israeli, Palestinian and

Hawaiian children will spend a few weeks over the summer together.

Akhras and his board members—one of whom is Patch Adams—aim to create opportunities for dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian children: They educate the public on interfaith relationships, cultural understanding and forgiveness. They call their mission "Aloha Quest."

In 1999, the native of the West Bank came to Hawai'i, where he was struck by the peaceful ancient Hawaiian traditions and ho'oponopono (setting things aright). "The depth of the Hawaiian mythology and the idea of community involvement hit my heart," he says.

Akhras believes that language and semantics are powerful. "We [the Israelis and the Palestinians] are of the same race—that's what gets me. If you look up the word 'Semite' in the dictionary, you'll see that we are all Semites."

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language*, "Semite" means "A member of a group of Semitic-speaking peoples

of the Near East and northern Africa, including the Arabs, Arameans, Babylonians, Carthaginians, Ethiopians, Hebrews, and Phoenicians; a Jew; or from the Bible, a descendant of Shem."

Akhras continues, "But when you grow up in a war zone, you are divided and you only see the dark side of humanity. The other side becomes monsters, dogs, or pigs."

Dehumanization in turn contributes to more violence.

"But there are so many examples of Palestinians and Israelis coming together to do good. And that's what I want here, in Hawai'i. It is paradise here. Stress creates a lack of creativity. You have to have a sense of support and comfort to think clearly and to create. I wish when I lived in the West Bank that I could have gotten to know artists and creative people. I think I would have thought differently then," he says.

Akhras is working in conjunction with other groups for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. One in particular, the Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group,

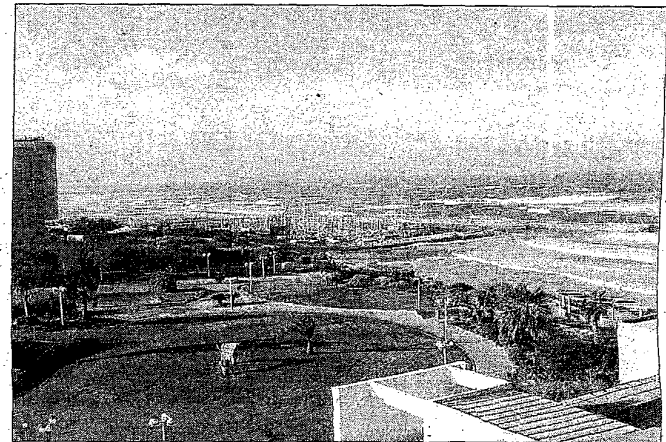
operating from San Mateo, California.

They strive to set up opportunities for dialogue for Jewish and Palestinian groups. Dr. Harold Saunders, former assistant secretary of state and a negotiator of the Camp David Accords, is quoted in their mission statement: "There are some things that only governments can do, such as negotiating binding agreements. But there are some things that only citizens can do, such as changing human relationships."

The Aloha Peace House has interfaith gatherings on Maui and in Honolulu so people can voice their concerns and questions about each other's faiths.

"Their hearts and ears are open to hearing about one another's journey in faith and just the journey in life," Akhras says. He also insists that violence has its roots in misunderstanding and miscommunication—or the total failure to communicate.

"Before, my image of an Israeli was a masked man



This photograph of the Israeli seaside looks a lot like Maui. Aloha Peace House aims to bring serenity and understanding to different cultures.

who would come into your house, armed and without asking permission," Akhras says. "Now, one of my best friends is a former Israeli military member. When I see him, I don't think of him as an Israeli, I just think of him as a sweet soul."

In 2003, Aloha Quest sponsored a Jewish rabbi and a Palestinian youth trainer to travel to Honolulu for a conference on peace. They gave speeches at mosques, synagogues, Buddhist temples and Christian churches, with discussions on everything from media bias to school curriculums. At the end of these rounds of discussions, Akhras noted that "Many people were surprised to know that it's not all negativity happening there, and that there is progress and reconciliation."

As for his own childhood, he has "wonderful, sweet memories." His father owned olive orchards, and even now

he uses olive oil for "everything." He remembers, however, that whenever an Israeli tank would drive down the main road in his village, children would throw stones at the tanks, much like they do today.

But times have changed. "When Arafat came to Palestine and we had some representation, guns started coming into the refugee camps. I had never seen a gun up close before. That was something you'd see on TV only," he says. "Now, with all the divisions and roadblocks, the kids in Palestinian refugee camps live in such isolation. They have no life as we know it here in Hawai'i. Gaza is the worst place in the world. I want the kids to know life outside of there, and to know that there is something better," he said.

To get involved with Aloha Peace House, e-mail [nationsofpeace@yahoo.com](mailto:nationsofpeace@yahoo.com).

