



## The Neighborhood Accords

Creating peace can be as simple as neighbor talking to neighbor

**The young family** of five—two parents and three girls—arrived next door just after the blizzard of 2010, in a car with mattresses strapped to the roof. The mother and the oldest daughter, perhaps aged 12 or 13, wore head scarves and long skirts. I guessed they were Muslim.

Normally, my husband and I would've reached out to them; we like socializing with our Kensington neighbors. But whenever they left the house, they kept to themselves, heads down. Their wariness held us back. It seemed they wanted to be left alone.

Curious, I approached our neighbor, who explained that he was renting out the bottom floor of his house to them. The family was, indeed, Muslim; they were here under a State Department ref-

ugee-assistance program. They'd come from Iran. Or was it Iraq? I couldn't recall which country he'd mentioned; all I could remember was that they'd been forced to leave their homeland—just like my Jewish family had been 100 years ago.

My father's family emigrated to America after escaping a pogrom in Russia; my mother's family fled Czarist Rumania. My parents raised my brothers and me in a small western Pennsylvania town, where I was one of only five Jews in a high school graduating class of 468. Nearly all my girlfriends were Christian, as was Mike, my only high school boyfriend.

Several months after we met, Mike gave me a "going steady" ring. I badly

wanted to wear it, but I knew my father would be furious about my dating a Christian, so I slipped the ring onto a necklace and wore it under my clothes. The first time Mike came to visit, my father greeted him at the door, brandishing a gun I didn't even know he had. My father laughed and said the gun wasn't loaded, but Mike quickly backed away. He broke up with me the next day.

After that, I grew bolder in engaging my father in his favorite pastime: talking politics around the dinner table. He'd been a merchant mariner in World War II—an occupation whose mortality rate during the war was higher than most branches of the American military—so when he said he despised the Germans and "the Japs," I understood. But I'd argue with him about his blanket assertion that all Arabs hated Jews and aimed to destroy Israel. After one particularly heated debate, my father declared me "The Little Arab" and stopped talking to me. I felt like an outcast on the Gaza Strip. Some weeks later, though, my father began talking to me again as if nothing had happened. I was relieved, but not surprised. For despite our political differences, my father loved me. And I loved him.

Since that time, I've longed to find a way to help foster peace in the Middle East. When this Muslim family moved in next door, I thought: *Maybe I can nudge peace along in the humblest of ways, by introducing this family to their Jewish neighbors.*

Only I couldn't make contact with them. If I saw them leaving their house, I'd casually step outside and tend our garden, hoping for a chance to say hello. But they'd quickly vanish back inside, shutting the front door with a quiet click.

Then one day, their raven-haired preschooler raced outside as I was getting into my car. She introduced herself as Hadi and declared in proud and perfect English that it was her birthday. "Happy birthday, Hadi," I said, smiling, before driving away. After that, whenever Hadi saw me, she ran out and made the

same declaration. "It's not your birthday, Hadi," groaned Amina, the serious older sister who clearly had now been assigned to accompany her.

Several months later, Hadi ran out alone to tell me how much she missed the cat she had to leave behind when the family left Iraq. Having owned and cherished cats for decades, I empathized with her loss. So I bought her a stuffed cat and rapped on their front door to deliver it.

The slats of the window blinds parted slightly. Two dark eyes peered out at me, and eventually a man opened the door a crack. I quickly explained that I'd bought Hadi a special birthday present. He introduced himself as the girls' father, Ayman. "My English is not good," he said. "But come in."

Their oldest daughter Malak served as our translator. It turned out that Hadi never had a cat; it was just another tale she liked to tell. The mother, eyes downcast, began to giggle. Ayman smiled and shook his head. Then everyone, includ-

ing Hadi, started to laugh.

Since then, we've laughed together many times. We've even shared a big, potluck meal.

Now, Malak takes care of our cats when we're away. When I gave her a key to my house, Ayman emailed me. "Thank you for entrusting the care of your house to my daughter," he wrote. "It means a lot to her, and to me."

While away, I buy souvenirs for all the girls, which gives me the opportunity to visit them when I return. Recently they told me they'd begun karate lessons.

"Is this something you'd have been able to do in Iraq?" I asked.

The girls grinned at me. "No way," said Malak, who stopped wearing a head scarf years ago and now sports snug leggings and t-shirts.

"Whose idea was it to take karate lessons?" I asked.

They looked over at Ayman, who nodded.

"There is a saying in Muslim culture,"

he said. "You raise your children for the time in which they are living. Not for your time."

These days, Ayman and I often fall into lengthy conversations about religion and culture. Recently he told me that my husband and I are the first Jewish people he's really come to know. Before he met us, he said, all he knew of Jewish people were "opinions."

"No," he said, clearly frustrated. "That is not the right word."

"Propaganda?" I offered.

"Yes. That's it," he said. Then he added, "I feel lucky to have you and Bill as my neighbors."

"I feel lucky, too," I replied.

What's the key to peace? Perhaps it's simply this: two neighbors slowly learning to trust—and like—each other. ■

*Marilyn Millstone is a journalist and playwright who lives in Kensington. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.*

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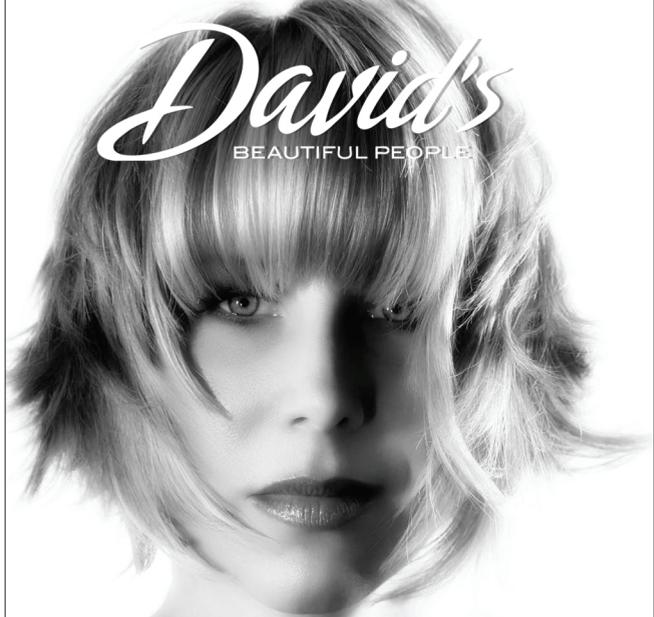


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