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PEACE PIONEERS—Dr. Bonnie Stewart, third from right, enjoys the sights of the Old City of Jerusalem with colleagues from the Peres Center for Peace and San Diego State University's Research Foundation's Hansen Institute for World Peace. From left, they and their associations are Gal Blonder (Peres Center) Marv Spira (Hansen Institute), Oren Blonder (Peres Center), Stewart, and Cindy Ehrlich and Sanford Ehrlich (Hansen Institute).

THE JEWISH CITIZEN

A second- generation scholar promotes food's peace-building possibilities

By Donald H. Harrison



SAN DIEGO--Dr. Bonnie Stewart, executive director of the San Diego State University-based Hansen Institute for World Peace, represents the second generation in her family who has understood the power of food to change the world for the better. Her father, Dr. Donald Stewart, was a plant pathologist and associate of Dr. Norman Borlaug. The latter's efforts to promote a "green revolution" was honored with a Nobel Prize.

The younger Stewart, then studying political science, had completed a bachelor's degree at the University of Minnesota and a master's degree at the University of Arizona when her parents moved to Cairo, Egypt, in 1972 to work on a project to increase yields of cereal crops under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Initially, Bonnie Stewart thought she would stay with her parents in Egypt over the three months of summer vacation, then return to Arizona to start on her doctorate. But, fascinated by Arab culture and feeling the need to learn the local language, history, and customs, she stretched the three months into two years, during which time she also researched how organizationally efficient the Ford Foundation, the United Nations and Egypt's Ministry of Agriculture were in promoting agriculture.

Stewart returned to the United States anxious to build a doctoral program in political science based on her Egyptian experiences, but such interdisciplinary doctoral programs on many college campuses had yet to dawn. She was told her ideas just didn't fit the political science field, so she found herself a new academic home—the University of Arizona's Department of Near Eastern Studies.

A career thus was launched that now looks forward to the unveiling in Israel this October of a new agricultural product—one that is both good to eat and which will help promote peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. At the tenth anniversary celebration of the Peres Peace Center—founded before he became Israel's President by Shimon Peres—Stewart will introduce a group of Israeli and Arab agricultural entrepreneurs who now are creating the prototype of a blended olive oil, which utilizes the oil from olives grown both in Israel and in the Palestinian West Bank. The assumption is that creating products and marketing them together will foster ongoing economic partnerships, providing incentives for peace.

The olive oil will be presented at a plenary session of the international conference as a symbolic first step in creating partnerships between the Israelis and the

Palestinians, as well as with their neighbors the Egyptians and the Jordanians, to jointly market products grown on the soil of all four countries. Besides olive oil, almonds and tomatoes are considered appropriate products with the potential for sustainable sales not only in the Middle East but in Europe and in the United States.

Stewart’s doctoral research took her a bit south of the Middle East to the French-speaking, sub-Saharan West African country of Niger, where she studied the organizational efficiency of the marketing department for agricultural products in Zinder province. “I identified the obstacles both internally and system wide for agricultural products produced in Zinder for export,” she explained.

Almost immediately after being granted her PhD, it was back to the Middle East for Stewart—only this time it was to the American University in Beirut, where she was recruited to serve as an assistant professor of agricultural and rural institutions. “So I taught agricultural economics, did research in Beirut and in the Beka’a Valley on the social economic integration of the Bedouin nomad.”

The Arabic that she had learned in Cairo was not necessarily a plus in Beirut, she said. “It was a liability instead of an asset—given the politics in the region. If I would go to the market and speak Arabic with an Egyptian accent, it wasn’t as well received as I would have anticipated,” she said. “I started studying again, probably within a month of arriving, and began learning the Lebanese dialect...”

In 1980, during the time she was at the American University of Beirut, Stewart made what would become the first of many trips to Israel. She couldn’t simply drive south and cross the border, because there were no diplomatic relations between the two countries. So, with a friend, she flew to Cyprus, spent a day, and then boarded a flight to Tel Aviv. Noting the visa stamps from Lebanon and other Arab countries in Stewart’s American passport, Israeli border agents at the airport asked if she wanted a Hebrew stamp in her passport, or simply a separate piece of paper that need not provide telltale evidence to the Arabs that she had been there. Stewart chose the latter, and went on a two week tour of Israel in which she went to Tel Aviv, then gravitated north to Haifa and eventually to Metula, the finger of Israel adjoining Lebanon where, at the time, there was a “good fence” through which Lebanese laborers could cross without hassle into Israel.

She returned to the United States in the 1980s, filling academic positions at both the University of Arizona and New Mexico State University, and also consulting for a private educational firm that sought to offer its services in the Middle East.

Stewart joined the San Diego State Research Foundation, where the Hansen Institute for World Peace is housed, in 1989. The Institute is funded largely by the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, which was established by the estate of South Bay farmer Fred J. Hansen, who was a believer in peace through agriculture.

Before Stewart had arrived, the Hansen Institute had quiet, off-the-record successes

in bringing together Israeli and Arab agriculturalists at conferences based in the United States. Though their governments were at odds—sometimes at war—with each other, these agriculturalists could talk the common language of crops. No matter which side of a border in the Middle East they lived, they faced similar problems: A lack of rainfall and the need to make each drop of water count; the expansion of the desert, and insects and other pests, which walked or flew across borders with impunity. With the help of the Hansen Foundation, the agriculturalists created an Integrated Crop Management program to bring best practices to all countries in the region.

As U.S. President Bill Clinton started promoting face-to-face meetings on the White House lawn between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Israelis and Jordanians, the Hansen Institute—at the request of Shimon Peres—shifted into a higher gear. Until the day when relations were normalized among the parties in the Middle East, the Hansen Institute took the lead in scheduling meetings—and developing projects—that brought Israelis together with their Arab neighbors in common agricultural efforts.

Under the directorship of her predecessor, Harry Albers, Stewart worked on a program which directed hundreds of Egyptian agricultural experts to American universities for training in new techniques. Additionally, she was assigned to a collaborative peace project that quietly brought together agricultural experts from the U.S., Israel and Morocco.

The program was supported by Morocco’s king, but initially only if it could be kept quiet. “Many of our Israeli participants had to go to France and obtain a card that would show that they had been born someplace in Morocco,” Stewart remembered. Eventually matters improved sufficiently that some Israelis could go directly to Morocco. Under the watchful eye of Andre Azoulay, a Jewish advisor the king. Morocco even hosted an agricultural conference, with Israeli delegates, in Casablanca in 1993.

According to Stewart, Mideast peace making is not for those who are easily frustrated. Just when you think you are on the track—making great progress in the program—something happens in the region that derails peace efforts. The first and second intifadas were examples. So was the Second Lebanon War.

“It’s a step forward, two steps back, two steps forward, four steps back,” Stewart said. “It is a tough process, a discouraging one at some times. But we have to keep our eye on the target and recognize that peace is a process and not an end state.”

The very meeting at which the blended olive oil project will be debuted in an example of improvements in the region, said Stewart.

Today the Peres Center for Peace is in a position to coordinate all the details of the meeting both with Israelis and with such Arab neighbors as the Palestinians,

Jordanians and the Egyptians. It no longer is required that the Hansen Institute in far-off San Diego handle the arrangements; as is appropriate, this can be done right in the region itself.

Two San Diegans have joined Stewart in helping to develop the blended olive oil concept: Marvin Spira, an entrepreneur with a long history bringing packaged foods such as Chinese dishes, cheesecakes and frozen fish to the American market, and Dr. Sanford Ehrlich, Qualcomm executive director of the Entrepreneurial Management Center in San Diego State University's School of Business. .

At a meeting last month in Tel Aviv, the three met with Israelis and Arabs to discuss not only the concept of the joint product, but such particulars as bottling, international standardization trends, and modern olive press management. They also heard from an Arab and Israeli entrepreneur who on their own had developed a blended product and who wished to explore being incorporated in this larger multi-national effort.



“We went through the development of the business plan for a pilot project on a theoretical basis ... but the actual appointing of a project manager, bottler container designer, distributor, and so forth will have to be worked out this month and in September,” said

Stewart, shown at right at an Israeli olive store. “Hopefully, by October at the 10th anniversary of the Peres Center, the product can debut.”

I asked Stewart whether the olive trees on either side of the Israeli-Palestinian border are so different that blending the olive oils will produce an appreciably different taste.

“The assumption is that you obviously need to have the highest quality product because otherwise the consumer will only buy it once,” she replied. “But it is also marketed for a purpose and that purpose is peace.”

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