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C.V. woman serves in West Bank

Volunteer trip reveals human side of war

By ELISABETH NADIN
 Herald Correspondent

As a paramedic, Lisabeth Kaplan went to the West Bank to help. As a Jew, she went to see what life in the Middle East was really like in these tumultuous times.

"I wanted to get some perspective on Palestinian life in occupied areas, where one of the gaping holes in my understanding is," Kaplan said. "I was aware of my own ignorance, and how limited the information from the media can be, for various reasons. I wanted to get a more direct education," she said.

Kaplan, a 39-year-old Carmel Valley resident, returned Feb. 23 from a monthlong trip through Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the West Bank. For two weeks, she traveled with a group of 17 American Muslims, Jews and Christians to hear stories from residents of the battered region.

When her fellow travelers left for home, Kaplan stayed on. She worked 13-hour shifts, every night for two weeks, in an ambulance transporting Palestinian patients through the occupied territory. Sometimes she worked through the day as well.

Kaplan rode ambulances to and from a Palestinian Red Crescent ambulance station in Tulkarem, a town of 35,000 just west of the Israel-West Bank border. She said the mix of medical emergencies in Tulkarem was similar to what she's seen in her work in Los Angeles and Monterey counties -- some accident-related and some health-related, some critical and some not. "Life is not like it is on TV," Kaplan said.

The difference, Kaplan said, is in how ambulance workers in the occupied territories are treated by Israeli soldiers. She said Palestinian movement is restricted, and people are stopped at several checkpoints on the roads or randomly by soldiers in cars. Ambulances are not exempt, Kaplan said, and that distressed her.

"Although I understand, especially given my background, why on some level life has become this way -- from the Israeli perspective, why they feel they need to check everything -- we only had real patients who needed to get where they were going," said Kaplan. She said ambulances were constantly stopped, and the critical nature of the patient's condition seldom made a difference.

"The people who are working on the ambulance have this constant, unrelenting frustration and obstacle to their work because of the restrictions," she said.

Kaplan related some harrowing checkpoint experiences. In one incident, she said, while she was helping transport an unconscious, bleeding patient from the Tulkarem hospital to another hospital in neighboring Nablus, the ambulance was stopped by Israeli soldiers for what seemed like 15 minutes. "When there's this

kind of urgency, time always feels longer," she said. "It seemed like they were just sitting there, making us wait."

Other times, inspections were straightforward. At one checkpoint, she said, she saw the same soldier several days in a row. "He got to recognize me and he knew the personnel and he would be very friendly," said Kaplan. "We'd say hello and he'd wave, check IDs, look under the bench seat, ask 'What's wrong with the patient?' but went through the checking process efficiently and was friendly and his vocabulary was respectful."

Experiences like these helped Kaplan see the individual component of groups on either side of the conflict, she said. "In Israeli society and our society, we see the suicide bombers. They do exist, but they're not the only element to the society," she said. On the other side, she said, "Palestinians see the soldiers and they see Sharon and they see Bush, but these societies are made up of lots of human beings," she said.

"A huge part of that conflict, and any conflict, is the dehumanization process."

Kaplan's medical work in Tulkarem sprang out of a desire to help people regardless of their background, she said. "One reason I'm doing this job is that it provides service for anyone who is in need," she said.

Kaplan said being Jewish was one reason she wanted to see what life was really like in the Middle East. After being there, though, she said awareness of her Judaism became a struggle. "And that difficulty only increased," she said. "It's particularly difficult when you're Jewish to see how poorly people are treated under the Israeli flag." She said her Palestinian co-workers seemed to have an instinctive understanding that this was a difficult experience for her.

Still, said Kaplan, she also had sympathy for Israelis. She heard that couples would walk on opposite sidewalks in Israeli cities, so if there were a suicide bombing, one parent would survive. "There are people who won't let their children out of the houses," Kaplan said. "So there's also this sense of imprisonment. It comes from a different place. There's this underlying fear within both communities."

Kaplan traveled the first two weeks in the Middle East under the auspices of Interfaith Peace-Builders, one of several programs run by the Washington-based, nonprofit Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Peace-Builders has sent almost 30 delegations to the Middle East since 1975 to learn about Israeli and Palestinian struggles from people on both sides of the conflict. Delegations visit refugee camps, hospitals and universities. They speak with peace activists, private citizens and representatives of nongovernmental organizations. They spend some nights in Palestinian homes, some in Israeli homes.

Gretchen Merryman, an intern with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, visited the Middle East with Kaplan last month. "We try not just to sit in meetings all the time but to witness what this conflict has resulted in," Merryman said. They also share their experiences in the Middle East when they return to the United States.

Kaplan will speak to the congregation at Temple Beth El, the Salinas synagogue where she is a member. She also hopes to talk at local schools.

The recent delegation leaders were pleased by Kaplan's teaching abilities, said Joe Groves, Interfaith Peace-Builders program coordinator. "They were very impressed with her open-mindedness, her ability to see the subtleties and the gray areas of what people were saying to them and then to articulate that to the whole group," said Groves.

Back home, Kaplan's co-workers admire her courage. "I don't think she has the whole concept of fear down," said Tracy Villanueva, a Big Sur paramedic. He said he thinks Kaplan's volunteer work is the kind of help the Middle East needs most.

"She's a great paramedic, she's a great individual," he said. "I think that's the kind of insight and courage that it's going to take to come up with any kind of meaningful solution over there."



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