

Yalla Journal aims to humanize Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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Nearly two years ago, Asher Greenberg tried his luck at submitting a piece to *Yalla Journal*. Today, he is the director of its board.

"I went from nothing to leading the organization, which is not exactly how I planned it," said 23-year-old Greenberg with a smile.

Yalla Journal is a youth initiative that seeks to create a dialogue between Arabs and Jews about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through personal and artistic expression. Submissions to the journal range from poetry to personal stories, and provide a constructive alternative to the highly polarized academic arguments that dominate university campuses across the country.

"The project has an inherent value in opening people up to things they might have, emotionally, not even wanted to look at," said Greenberg, adding that *Yalla's* goal is to humanize the conflict.

Yalla Journal was founded at McGill University in Montreal in 2004. Since then three boards, with Arab and Jewish members, have published two editions of the journal.

When Greenberg heard about the journal from a friend on the board, Ghassan Abou-Hamra, it had been almost eight months since any significant work was done on the volunteer project.

With Abou-Hamra's help, Greenberg revived *Yalla Journal*, creating a new board and eventually taking over as the director in March of this year. The new board has collected a bank of submissions, redesigned the website and begun fundraising to create a third edition of the journal.

Though he was not around when the decision to name the project was made, Greenberg thinks it was a good choice.

"It means 'let's get going' ... People always talk about how there will be peace in 100 years, right? But if we don't get started now, why would 100 years be any different?" he said.

Yalla Journal submissions come primarily from people aged 18 to 30.

"[People in this age group] are still forming their beliefs, and maybe they're overly passionate, and so the trick is to catch people before they go out into the

world and they make those important contributions," said Greenberg.

Greenberg graduated from the University of Toronto this past April with a degree in political science and human biology. He is considering a future career in political and social journalism or in medicine, but for now, the journal is his main focus.

"I want the next edition published [and] I want to leave *Yalla* a legacy of stable funding [and] set up practices [to keep it organized]," he said.

Greenberg hopes that the next edition of the journal will be put to practical use in volunteer programs in Israel and the West Bank.

"I want the book to be used," he said, "not just individually distributed to people to read."

According to Greenberg, *Yalla Journal* has received positive feedback from the Toronto community.

However, some Arab and Jewish groups have made it known that they do not support the *Yalla* project, specifically because *Yalla* does not take a side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Greenberg and his



Asher Greenberg, the director of *Yalla Journal*.

tunity to do just that. *Yalla Journal* organized Confronting Ourselves, an event that featured young Arabs, Jews and others who were interested in the conflict and sharing stories, poetry and songs, many of which were submissions to the journal.

The event took place at the Free Times Café in downtown Toronto, where close to 100 guests noshed on falafel and latke platters while watching performers in the intimate setting.

As the event began, Greenberg told the audience, "We don't have an agenda to tell you the truth... We do, however, hope you listen with an open mind and an open heart."

The audience heard pieces ranging from a story about soccer and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an amusing poem about hummus called *Spreads of Seduction*.

They were also treated to Middle Eastern-influenced music played by Aviva Chernick and Aaron Lightstone of the band Jaffa Road.

Yalla board member Najat Abdel-Hadi, 23, shared her emotional story of growing up in the West Bank city of Nablus, and of her first encounter with Israelis in the Diaspora.

She said that she believes *Yalla Journal* fosters the kind of dialogue necessary to create stable peace in the Middle East.

Audience member and well-known Canadian journalist Jan Wong said she thought the event was very interesting and suitable for *Yalla's* cause.

"Just putting [the event] together means people talk and sit and eat together," she said.

"I'm shocked and amazed. I think people have been so positive and so warm," said *Yalla* board member Naomi Kramer.

With the success of Confronting Ourselves, *Yalla Journal* is hoping to put on another event soon. Greenberg and his new board are committed to keeping the dialogue going with the next edition of the journal set to be published in the coming year.

For more information about the journal or to submit a piece, visit www.yallajournal.com.



Jaffa Road band members Aaron Lightstone, left, and Aviva Chernick perform at an event featuring presentations by people on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [Michael Katz photos]



Yalla Journal board members, in the back row from left, are Ghassan Abou-Hamra, Farah Kalbouneh, Justine Katz and Najat Abdel-Hadi and, in the front row from left, are Asher Greenberg, Daniel Adler and Naomi Kramer.

peers on the board are careful to keep their personal stances on the conflict from influencing the work they do for *Yalla*.

"We do have really different opinions, but that's OK," he said, adding that nothing can be accomplished in the way of peace without taking time to listen to stories from both sides.

Earlier this month, Torontonians had the oppor-