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DISRUPTIVE EMPATHY

The importance of discussing historical trauma through a nuanced lens



FUTURE HOPE: In a vision of what could be, Israeli and Palestinian children look at each other from a short distance, hesitant but filled with hope. (art by Sage Gilliland)

PETER RADOSH

Associate Editor-in-Chief

Chatter filled the packed gymnasium, and the aroma of food hung in the air as crowds of students walked from stand to stand during the Jan. 17 Multicultural Fair. A junior — who is Persian, from Iran, and Jewish — who will remain anonymous, was working the Judaism stand with their friends when a student approached and, without introduction, asked, “Israel or Palestine?”

The student’s abrupt and generalized question caught the junior off guard. Surrounded by the Multicultural Fair, only one thought came to mind.

“Just why, why are you asking that ... why are you trying to cause more division,” the junior said. “This is the multicultural fair; this is a day to embrace your culture; let Palestinians embrace their culture; that’s beautiful. Let Muslim Club embrace their culture, let Jewish Club embrace their culture. ... It just rubbed me the wrong way, completely.”

Yet, the Multicultural Fair was not the only context in which the comment was made. That day, Jan. 17, 2025, according to the New York

Times, the terms of a 42-day ceasefire between Israel and Hamas were officially agreed upon. And just two days later, the skies above Gaza and Israel fell silent for the first time in over 14 months as prisoners and hostages were exchanged on both sides.

The current agreed-upon ceasefire in Gaza is the first phase of a suggested framework for more peaceful relations between the Israeli government and Hamas. It’s a three-phase proposal which, according to the United Nations, is an 18-week plan to release all Israeli captives, return Palestinian prisoners, end the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and increase humanitarian aid in Gaza with reconstruction in mind.

The ceasefire is not the first within the context of the Israel-Hamas war, a conflict that has been ongoing since Oct. 7, 2023, and the fifth war in Gaza since 2007. The agreement means a temporary pause in the fighting in Gaza, but not on any other fronts of the wider Israel-Palestine conflict.

According to the junior, as someone who is ethnically but not religiously Jewish, there is both comfort and uncertainty in the hostage exchange, as the wider Israel-Palestine conflict is still ongoing.

“I’m glad the hostages are coming home, but [there is] the fear of something happening again,” the junior said. “But, Jewish lives were not the only ones lost; so many Palestinians have been killed, and I think if people fail to realize that, [then] you are a part of the issue. You need to recognize that there has been loss on both sides; you can’t just look at it from one point of view.”

As someone of Iranian descent, the junior has always had to confront multiple perspectives regarding the wider Israel-Palestine conflict. According to Reuters, the Iranian government is a supporter of Hamas, the government in Gaza, but not Fatah, which governs the West Bank.

But, as a teenager and student, they feel the issue is not addressed correctly in the younger generation.

“It’s not even talking about the conflict, it’s just like, ‘Which side are you on?’” the junior said. “It’s that division that I mentioned again, ‘Are you for Palestinians or are you for Israelis?’”

The junior’s observation is one that College World Religions teacher John Camardella centers on in his courses.

SEE ‘POSSIBILITY’ ON PG. 2

Realigning rivalries in new MSL

PETER RADOSH

Associate Editor-in-Chief

At Barrington Community Stadium on April 4, 2024, boys’ lacrosse lost 15-2 against the Barrington Broncos. Although just in his sixth game on varsity, now-junior Mike Grund could see the disparities between the teams.

“They had faster kids, stronger kids,” Grund said. “They had kids going to play lacrosse in college, like lacrosse is their whole entire life, [and] they have way more kids in the program, so they have more to select from.”

It’s not just a matter of players. For lacrosse specifically, Grund points to the age of each program as another factor leading to the lopsided matchup.

“It’s almost unfair,” Grund said. “Barrington has had a program there for longer, so they’ve had many years to develop it more when the [Mid-Suburban League] East has just five-year-old lacrosse programs for boys. ... So, they have better coaches, better players, just more awareness for the program in that area, like feeding into the school.”

Blowouts are common within the MSL, and conversations about realignment have been circulating since splitting the league into the East and West in 1998.

“It’s been going on for 20 years,” Athletic Director Scott McDermott said. “They’ve been talking about, ‘How do we create a league that really elevates all athletes and makes sure that we put them in a position where they are competing against like-level competition?’ So that everybody gets a chance to experience the highs and growth in athletics.”

Thus, for the 2025-26 season, the MSL will have a new look. Excluding football, where the MSL East and West will remain, the new MSL is a two-year trial run consisting of an upper and lower division. Teams will be graded and sorted based on their records over the past three seasons rather than two fixed divisions based on geography. According to the Daily Herald, for the 2025-26 season, 60% of a team’s grade will be from the 2024-25 season, 30% from 2023-24 and 10% from 2022-23. Every year, teams at the varsity level will be reevaluated; top teams will be in a “premier” division, while bottom teams will be placed in a “developmental” division. Junior varsity teams will more or less follow the placement of the varsity teams.

SEE ‘CHANGES’ ON PG 3.

WHAT’S INSIDE?

IN-DEPTH

LEARN ABOUT THE DIVERSITY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES ACROSS PROSPECT (PAGES 6-7)

FEATURES

FEBRUARY IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH, FIND OUT WHAT EBONY CLUB IS DOING FOR IT (PAGE 8)

POSSIBILITY: Looking beyond division

CONTINUED FROM PG. 1

Camardella has been passionate about studying religion for what he describes as most of his adult life. His course at Prospect is the first dual-credit course in America where students can study religion at a collegiate level in a public high school, which he created as a Program Fellow in Education through the Harvard Divinity School.

Camardella eventually received a master's degree in Religion and Public Life from Harvard in 2022 and is committed to fostering religious understanding in a variety of educational spaces. In addition to teaching at the high school level, he has designed and taught nine different graduate-level religion courses for colleagues at D214, including a course on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Within the Israel-Palestine conflict, one common assumption is that it only exists between two warring parties, similar to the divide the junior had observed in how the younger generation speaks about the conflict. In both his high school and graduate level courses, Camardella makes sure students focus on recognizing and appreciating the internal diversity of both Palestinian and Israeli communities.

"[We're] complicating what we would call the 'binary,'" Camardella said. "There are Arab Jews, [and] there are Palestinian Christians.

... Too often, the binary of Palestine-Israel or Arab-Jew is presented as two homogenous entities, which oversimplifies the reality."

Reducing a conflict into two groups removes the individual human aspect of conflict. For Camardella, seeing this individual aspect firsthand while doing on-the-ground work in both the West Bank and Israel sparked his interest in the history and dynamics of the conflict.

He first went to Israel and the West Bank in 2017 as a part of a curriculum project. He returned in 2022 as a student in Harvard's Biblical Archaeology program, spending around a month on dig sites in the region. While there, he made an effort to speak with and hear the experiences of a wide variety of people.

"I've always been drawn to understanding how people make sense of suffering ... both their own and that of others," Camardella said. "In many traditions, grappling with the human condition is central to how communities shape their values and responses to hardship. When I approached my study of this region, I did so with an open mind, seeking to meet people where they are, learn from their perspectives and better understand their lived experiences."

The human condition, by definition, is the accumulation of thoughts, emotions and experiences that influence how one acts or views the world. Each experience is different, and in

Camardella's classes, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing and honoring each person's unique experience and perspective.

"The way we approach every single topic is that we simply ask students to situate themselves in what we would call a 'partial perspective,'" Camardella said. "We can honor a student's ideas and experiences while also acknowledging that their perspective is not universal. As we study together, we recognize that every viewpoint is 'situated' — it is one piece of a much larger picture."

Recognizing any given perspective as partial within a discussion allows participants to discern the reasons behind the perspective while also realizing that said perspective does not represent an entire group.

"That doesn't make it relative or less important," Camardella said. "In fact, I would argue it makes it more real — because instead of speaking on behalf of an entire community, we engage with knowledge as something situated, partial and deeply contextual. My role is to help students disrupt assumptions and recognize that every perspective is shaped by lived experience, history and position in the world."

It's not just the Israel-Palestine conflict where initial assumptions can characterize entire groups. For American students, the news of the ceasefire comes sandwiched between a polarizing election and a new administration in the United States, where students are bombarded with geopolitical news and conflicts whenever they check their phones. In such times, the junior feels educators can help provide a safe space to facilitate difficult but necessary conversations.

"Go all in a circle ... just have a class discussion," the junior said. "Even [on issues] like abortion, just having open group conversations because I think you can take a lot away from that."

Camardella bases his courses on open discourse, as he says it is the first step in creating a more understanding world. In the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the recent ceasefire in Gaza, it's not always as sim-

ple as reaching across and just bridging the gap. Addressing the conflict means addressing decades of generational trauma where countless people were killed or displaced. In such a scenario, Camardella offers the concept of "disruptive empathy" — a framework that challenges students to critically engage with multiple perspectives while acknowledging the deep historical wounds that shape them.

"Engaging deeply with the suffering of those whose experiences differ from my own has helped me see the humanity in perspectives I may not have fully un-

- John Camardella,
College World Religions teacher

**PRACTICING
DISRUPTIVE EMPATHY
REQUIRES COURAGE
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TO IMAGINE BEYOND
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TOWARD WHAT
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PEACE: A ceramic displaying the word "peace" in Arabic, English and Hebrew hangs above the room number outside College World Religions teacher John Camardella's classroom. The art serves as a reminder for students to strive for peace. (photo by Peter Radosh)

derstood before," Camardella said.

Camardella acknowledges his own background and highlights how he approaches disruptive empathy.

"As someone who is not Jewish or Palestinian, I still have a responsibility to listen, learn and acknowledge the weight of historical trauma," Camardella said. "Even for those without a direct or 'felt' memory of it, the Holocaust remains a profound generational trauma. In the same way, for Palestinians, the Nakba is a generational trauma that continues to shape lived experiences today."

According to the United Nations, the Holocaust was the "state-sponsored, ideologically-driven persecution and murder of six million Jews across Europe and half a million Roma and Sinti by Nazi Germany (1933-1945) and other racist states." The Nakba "refers to the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war."

For Camardella, disruptive empathy means that individual narratives are not mutually exclusive. It allows for narratives to be seen in relation to one another, creating a more constructive conversational setting.

"Disruptive empathy creates a space for conversations that move beyond simplistic narratives of suffering," Camardella said. "Instead of framing one side as the only victim or dismissing the pain of the other, it asks us to pause and recognize that both communities continue to carry generational trauma."

"It's about engaging with the full complexity of different narratives and understanding how historical wounds shape the present."

From what the junior has observed, social media is another daily factor removing the human aspect of conflict and reconciliation. Social media can sometimes amplify one-sided narratives, making it harder to engage in meaningful dialogue.

"What social media wants us to do is to divide both sides, which I think is exactly the opposite of what I think we should do," the junior said. "It's a difficult situation, but the more division we have, the worse it gets."

With the usage of social media, it can feel like empathy is impossible, especially regarding a subject like the Israel-Palestine conflict. But for Camardella, this reinforces the importance of disruptive empathy.

"Disruptive empathy is about shifting focus from what is probable to what is possible," Camardella said. "The probable outcome often assumes violence as inevitable, but the possible outcome dares to believe peace has a chance. Practicing disruptive empathy requires courage and a willingness to imagine beyond what seems likely toward what could be."

Camardella cites the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa to demonstrate the real-world effectiveness of disruptive empathy. In May 2006, Camardella was invited to attend the Quest for Global Healing Conference in Bali, Indonesia, where he spent eight days with Tutu, and it shaped his outlook on reconciliation.

"I went to learn about peacebuilding from the man himself," Camardella said. "When Nelson Mandela was released from prison, South Africa stood on the brink of widespread violence. Instead, the TRC became a peaceful means of pursuing justice and one that sought truth and accountability without descending into bloodshed."

For Camardella, Tutu inspired him to become an educator and is the reason why the College World Religions class exists today.

"In just eight days, the entire trajectory of my life changed," Camardella said. "I began to see a deeper purpose in education — one that went beyond simply teaching a curriculum. Desmond Tutu showed me that another way of being in the world is possible, one where violence isn't the inevitable answer."

"That realization reshaped how I viewed my role as an educator and deepened my commitment to helping students see that a more just and peaceful world isn't just an ideal — it's something they have the power to build."

The junior, too, sees the power in possibility. "Recognize that the other side suffers," the junior said. "Recognize that Palestinians suffer, [and] Israelis suffer. ... I think it's really powerful when you can come to terms." ➔

DESMOND TUTU: College World Religions teacher John Camardella speaks with Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the Quest for Global Healing in Bali, Indonesia, in May 2006. Tutu was the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, a courtlike body focused on uncovering the truth of human rights abuses during apartheid. Their approach to reconciliation focused on identifying, honoring and spreading the victim's experiences and stories, rather than prosecuting perpetrators. For Camardella, Tutu's teaching was life-altering. "In just eight days, the entire trajectory of my life changed," Camardella said. "I began to see a deeper purpose in education — one that went beyond simply teaching a curriculum. Desmond Tutu showed me that another way of being in the world is possible, one where violence isn't the inevitable answer." (photo courtesy of John Camardella)

