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East Bay Life

Family Values | Berkeley activist Barbara Lubin shares the wealth—and the love—with children in the Middle East. | By Micky Duxbury

Barbara Lubin was 22 years old in 1967 when she walked into the Philadelphia military induction center along with 250 young men—and was told to strip. A dedicated and unusually daring draft counselor, Lubin had dressed in drag and hidden her hair in preparation for infiltrating an entry point into the U.S. military. As she peeled off her clothing, leaflets opposing the Vietnam War spilled from her undergarments. Her memories of that success are still vivid: “The sergeants were so enraged that they marched me out with bayonets and arrested me, but not before I was able to pass out hundreds of leaflets.”

Over the subsequent 40 years—35 of them spent in Berkeley—Lubin’s activism has spanned the globe: from the disability rights movement in Berkeley, to the anti-apartheid struggle centered at U.C. Berkeley, to the Bay Area Committee to Support the People of El Salvador. But since co-founding the Middle East Children’s Alliance (MECA) in 1988, she has focused her formidable energies on directing the work of this small Berkeley nonprofit dedicated to a better quality of life for Palestinian, Iraqi, and Lebanese families and children.

Since 1991, MECA has shipped medical supplies valued at more than five million dollars to Iraq as well as delivering truckloads of infant formula and baby food to that country; it also built two playgrounds in Lebanon. This past January, Lubin—who is Jewish — made her 19th trip to the region, first gathering four tons of medical supplies from a distribution center in Holland, then purchasing food, blankets, and 28 wheelchairs in Cairo. After adding a fully equipped ambulance and a truckload of children’s art supplies to their tab, Lubin and her team entered Gaza—just one day after major bombing stopped.

“Barbara is an extraordinary woman and what she has done with MECA is an amazing achievement,” says Osha Neumann, a well-

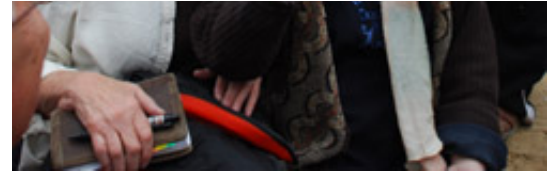


known Bay Area activist, artist, and author. “She’s fiercely independent, cranky, funny, and absolutely dedicated to the often unpopular cause of the Palestinians. For years she has gotten a lot of flak because of her criticism of Israeli policies. But she has steered clear of factionalism and like a laser, has focused her energy on the children.”

Walking into Lubin’s spacious office, located in a converted warehouse in the industrial flats of Berkeley, is like taking a history tour of MECA. Dozens of photos and posters, some featuring luminaries like writer Alice Walker, singer and songwriter Pete Seeger, and Middle East political historian and linguist Noam Chomsky, plaster the walls. The multicolored shawl around Lubin’s shoulders matches the vibrant colors of the surrounding images. Over the past 20 years, big-name events featuring celebrities have raised over 10 million dollars for MECA. Housed in the same location is Alliance Graphics, a screen-printing and embroidery shop whose profits provide a fair share of MECA’s office expenses and salaries. Securing these offices was a considerable challenge. “Several landlords would not rent to us because of the work we do, charging us with being anti-Semitic because of our support of the Palestinians,” Lubin says.

Lubin, whose gray, shoulder-length hair frames a face weathered by years of hard work, seems to have been born with a pragmatic, roll-up-your-sleeves attitude. But she’ll never forget, she says, a lesson about staying power that she received from the poet Allen Ginsberg, who served on MECA’s advisory board from 1988 to 1997. On the organization’s web page (www.mecaforpeace.org), Lubin recounts the story that continues to inspire her. Over dinner one evening in the late ‘90s, a small group from City Lights Books, along with MECA co-founders Lubin and Howard Levine, were “talking about what was happening in Rwanda, Iraq, and Palestine. None of the news was good and we were getting more and more depressed. I turned to Allen and asked, ‘So, Allen, where’s the hope?’ Allen jumped up, taking the table and the food with him. He was furious. ‘F— hope,’ he yelled. ‘It’s not about hope You don’t do what you do because you hope things will get better. It’s about getting up every morning and asking yourself what’s the right thing to do and doing it.’”

Like many political activists of her generation, Lubin was first inspired by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. But closer to home is the personal struggle that has fueled her fighting spirit—particularly on behalf of children—for nearly 40 years. Lubin’s third child, Charlie, was born in 1969 with Down syndrome. Physicians encouraged Lubin and her husband to place their son in an institution. Instead, Lubin says, “We decided to raise Charlie at home, and I was going to see to it that whatever he did, he was going to have the chance to do it the best way he could.”



Children’s champion: On a visit to Gaza in January, Barbara Lubin of Berkeley’s Middle East Children’s Alliance poses with a family and tours a ruined building. Photos by Sharon Wallace.

As Charlie grew older, Lubin became involved in advocacy work for special education students. In 1979, she filed a complaint against the Berkeley Unified School District with the federal Office for Civil Rights for failing to comply with a federal law that all children should be educated in the least restrictive environment possible. "Winning that complaint was the beginning of integrating children with disabilities into the educational mainstream," Lubin says. Charlie was ultimately enrolled in a Berkeley public school and graduated from Berkeley High in 1991 at age 22. He has been working at a Berkeley Safeway for over 16 years.

The educational system wasn't the only institution that Lubin battled for her child's sake. In the late '70s, Lubin and her family lived around the corner from Ozzie's, a favorite neighborhood soda fountain in the Elmwood section of Berkeley. Lubin says that Charlie stopped in at Ozzie's every afternoon for 12 years—until one day in 1981, he returned home with news that the shop had been sold. Lubin discovered that speculators had purchased the soda fountain, and intended to raise the rent 400 percent—far more than Ozzie could pay.

The next day, Lubin handed out leaflets calling for a neighborhood meeting at her home. "By 7:45, there were over 400 people on the front lawn of my house"—the first meeting of what was to become the Elmwood Preservation Alliance. "We worked on saving Ozzie's," Lubin says, "and ultimately passed the first commercial rent control law outside of New York City." (Sadly, the beloved soda fountain closed for good in 2007.)

Impressed by Lubin's community organizing abilities, colleagues in the disability rights movement encouraged her to run for the Berkeley School Board. Lubin served from 1982 to 1986, ultimately becoming board president. "Gus Newport, who was mayor of Berkeley at that time, began to educate me about the Middle East," she says. "Gradually, I began to think about the situation [between Israel and the Palestinians] very differently from what I had been taught growing up in a Jewish household."

Shortly after retiring from the school board, Lubin saw footage of the first intifada (Palestinian uprising) on CNN in December 1987. This pointed the way for her next phase of activism. In order to find out firsthand what was going on, Lubin and human rights attorney Jeanne Butterfield organized the first group of Americans to tour the Occupied Territories in early 1988. (Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza began after the 1967 Six Day War; international law considers both areas to be occupied territories.) "I was shocked by the conditions," says Lubin, who met with members of the Israeli peace movement as well as Palestinians. "We saw refugee camps with raw sewage running down the streets, demolished homes, and shortages of food, water, medical

care, and sanitation. When I returned, I was committed to addressing this horrible situation.”

Back in the Bay Area, the delegation held a press conference. Howard Levine, reporting on behalf of the San Francisco Examiner, was so moved that he and Lubin sat down that very day to co-create the organization that would eventually become MECA. The pair has been a couple ever since, with Levine, now MECA’s associate director as well as manager of Alliance Graphics, taking an active role in the organization.

Whether it is replacing trees uprooted by the Israeli military, distributing school supplies, or building playground equipment, MECA aims to make a difference in the daily lives of Palestinians. In 1999, MECA sponsored the only U.S. tour of Ibdaa, an internationally acclaimed youth dance troupe from the West Bank. The dancers introduced thousands of Americans to the stories of Palestinian refugees, farmers, and prisoners through traditional folkloric dance and theatrical choreography. That tour raised funds for a new four-story building with a computer center, women’s embroidery collective, restaurant, and guesthouse for the Dheisheh Refugee Camp. MECA has built three water purification systems in Gaza refugee camps, which provide immense relief to parents there; for the first time in years, their children can safely drink the water.

Through MECA’s 20-year history, Lubin has not witnessed much progress toward peace. Instead, she says she has seen the demolition of Palestinian houses, increasing Israeli military checkpoints, and the building of the 30-foot wall separating Palestinian people from their work, farms, and families. “I am 68 years old,” Lubin says, “and some of this has caught up with me. All these trips have taken their toll on me, but I’ve always had this idea that I would just keep going at the same pace and then someday just keel over and die.”

For now, though, she has no plans to scale back her schedule. “I’ll tell you some of what keeps me going: anger,” Lubin says. “Yes, I am exhausted at times, but mostly I push myself and when I am tired, I just push harder. That is why I have visited the Palestinians so often. When I go, I experience some of the reality of their lives: the checkpoints and the shortages, but I also experience many wonderful people who carry on no matter how horrible their lives are.”

But if anger is one ingredient in the cocktail that fuels Lubin’s activism, compassion is an even more crucial component. “I feel the same about the children I have met in the Middle East as I do about my son Charlie,” Lubin says. “Every one of them deserves a chance to have the best life possible.”

Micky Duxbury is a Berkeley-based freelance writer focusing on social justice issues. She is the author of *Making Room in Our Hearts: Keeping Family Ties Through Open Adoption* (Routledge, 2007).

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