Israelis, Palestinians lobby together at forum for peace

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MILFORD > The four speakers in City Hall Sunday night, two Israelis and two Palestinians, come from different backgrounds. Each started in a different place and came to their beliefs through their own growth process.

But all four, from an organization called Combatants for Peace, arrived at the same conclusion: Palestinians and Israelis need to learn how to end the cycle of violence and coexist.

On Sunday, just hours before flying home at the end of a two week U.S. tour sponsored by a Connecticut-based non-profit organization, IWagePeace, Inc., the four -- Israelis Adi Greenfield and Erez Krispin and Palestinians Mohammad Owedah and Khadir Najar -- told their stories for a final time this time around.

About 25 people, including Mayor Ben Blake, listened with us and that “the Palestinian territories were an integral part of Israel.”

In order for Israel to be safe, “we had to be aggressive,” Erez thought. He joined the Israeli army in 1987 and took an officers training course.

Eventually, he was stationed near a refugee camp in Gaza. Before that, “I had never been before to densely populated, highly Arab areas of the occupied territories,” he said. “My military service gave me the first taste of the occupation.”

During that intense period, “every night we used to raid houses” in search of dangerous people, and “during the day, we would install roadblocks and chase people” and that “our job at the end of the day was to deny the basic human rights to these people...” Erez said. “So my views have changed. But I still remain suspicious to the intentions of the Palestinians.”

What changed his mind was that “I met them face to face...and what happened to me is what happens to everyone who dares to mix with the enemy.”

“There is magic in what happens during the encounters...” he said. “That’s what happened to me.”

Owedah and Greenfield, who grew up in Silwan in East Jerusalem and Hebron, a small town outside Tel Aviv, respectively, had different twists.

questioned her military service, and while “I never felt like a combatant...I realized I had been dehumanizing people...”

“The more I learned about what Israel was doing in the occupied territories the more I wanted to remove myself from that and separate myself from that,” she said.

They took several questions from the audience, including one from Israeli transplant Naama de la Fontaine of New Haven, who wanted to know how the four activists’ families feel. De la Fontaine, who came to this country a decade ago, grew up in a small settlement in the West Bank, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors from Hungary, Belgium and Poland, she said later.

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"My story started with the occupation at age 18 when I was arrested...and then (Israeli soldiers) interrogated me and I was tortured -- mental torture as well," said Najjar, the first speaker, who grew up in the village of Yatma, near Nablus in the West Bank. "At that point, I did not know much about politics, nor did I know about the Palestinian issue."

But after that arrest, "I learned about politics and kmjy the occupation from older gentlemen," Najjar said.

After a few months, he was released and went back to school. He also began participating in demonstrations, counting Israeli rubber bullets and tear gas with Molotov cocktails and burning rubber.

He went away to college in Jordan but was arrested at the border in 1992 "on the basis that I participated in the war in Lebanon" and held for six months. His younger brother, arrested with him, was held for five years.

His father was killed in what he calls "a mysterious car accident" that he blames on the Israeli intelligence service. "I continued resistance and I developed hatred toward the occupation because of the killing of my father."

But after years of that, he came to a realization that the conflict wouldn't resolve anything. "We've got to have some sort of coexistence..." he said. "Peaceful resolution is much more beneficial than armed struggle."

Erez, who lives in Tel Aviv, comes from a starting point in which "I believed that the Arabs, including the Palestinians, did not want peace..." he said.

Bruce Barrett, who organized the tour, said that "war is never an act of healing. The healing acts come from the peacemakers. In this instance, war led to an occupation...the occupation led to resistance" and "these people have inherited this situation."

The purpose of the tour, which included similar talks elsewhere, participation in last weekend's Walk For Peace and meetings with government and religious leaders, is "to inform our community of the work of the Combatants For Peace and urge them to convince our government to take a firm hand in the peace process," he said.