

U of A staffer shares local peace award

By Geoff McMaster

In her day job, Evelyn Hamdon promotes one of the University of Alberta's most cherished values: fostering global citizenship.

So it's fitting that she shares this year's Salvos Prelorenzos Peace Award with other members of Edmonton's Arab/Jewish Women's Peace Coalition, given for taking that value to heart in her own life.

For 17 years Hamdon and other Jewish and Arab women have gathered to talk about both their differences and their vision for a more peaceful world. Through a process they call "respectful dialogue," they've found that discussing conflict, and especially questioning assumptions, has become a valuable end in itself.

"It was profoundly personal call to imagine another set of relations that Arabs and Jews could have," said Hamdon, who is project co-ordinator for global citizenship curriculum development in the Faculty of Education.

"The purpose isn't to come to consensus; it's to deepen one another's positions, identities and struggles. It's really about making space, without squishing it all into one common narrative.

"We realized right away that we'd bought into binary oppositions like 'us' and 'them,' Arab and Jew, Palestinian and Israeli," said Hamdon. "There was work we wanted to do around exploring how we had come to absorb those binaries, even though we'd been working against that for a while in other activist work."

"They're addressing a serious problem, not only in the Middle East, but everywhere in the world," said Dave Hubert, chair of the selection committee for the award. "Their message is one of hope and optimism that things can change, that we don't have to be enemies."

Jewish coalition Netta Phillet said the award, "feels great, because peace groups generally don't get much attention at all.

"The main thing you learn from this kind of respectful dialogue is how many sides there are to a story. Everyone has their own narrative, their own founding mythology."

"But the one thing I think we all agree on is we have to go forward, not back," said Phillet. "There's no way to bring even one person back to life."

"I have no idea where this will take us," said Hamdon. "If it feels productive and useful, and there's some value for people in sitting in that circle of women, I'll just keep doing it."