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Evelyn Hamdon, left, and Netta Phillet met at a 1991 antiwar rally and have worked for peace ever since.

Coalition of local Arab, Jewish women honoured for peace work

Members will help with documentary film to be shot in Middle East

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At an antiwar rally just before the first Gulf War, Evelyn Hamdon, who is of Arab descent, introduced herself to a woman wearing a Star of David.

The chance encounter in 1991 led to the formation of the Arab/Jewish Women's Peace Coalition, the start of a long-running dialogue between local Arab and Jewish women working for peace and understanding.

"Tonight, Hamdon and Netta Phillet, a Jewish member of the coalition, will receive this year's Salvos Prelorentzos Peace Award on behalf of the coalition. Prelorentzos, an Edmonton peace activist, died of cancer in 1995.

"It's very humbling," Hamdon said of the award. "It's nice to have this small work recognized, because sometimes these small initiatives go unrecognized."

Hamdon and Phillet hope the honour will help draw attention to the many

groups in North America and Europe, but particularly in the Middle East, that are involved in similar peace work.

They're also excited about a plan by several members of the coalition to visit the Middle East next fall and take part in a locally produced documentary film.

"We have every intention of making it happen," said Hamdon, who is working on her PhD at the University of Alberta. "It's something that we've wanted to do for many years and the time seems right."

Two filmmakers in Edmonton have shown their interest in the project and Phillet said various funding sources will be tapped in the coming months.

Phillet said group members who do travel to the Middle East will tour sites that as individuals they probably would not dream of visiting. For example, she has been to Israel twice but had no desire to visit the West Bank, occupied by Israel since 1967.

"My analogy is I don't really want to go to an Indian reservation in Canada,

either, because I think I'd probably feel quite crappy. I wouldn't want to go there and feel responsible for it; that it's my government that keeps people living in sometimes deplorable conditions."

Members of the Arab/Jewish Women's Peace Coalition meet monthly in their homes, where they engage in what Phillet describes as "respectful dialogue."

In 1996, the coalition collected medical and other supplies for victims of the bombings in Lebanon.

"We sometimes have a very loose agenda, but absolutely no hierarchy," Phillet said, adding that nobody chairs the monthly discussions. "We just follow our rule of not interrupting and everything seems to fall into place quite nicely."

Tonight's award ceremony is sponsored by Project Ploughshares Edmonton. John Siebert from the national headquarters of Project Ploughshares is the keynote speaker.

The award will be presented at 7:30 p.m. in the Heritage room at City Hall.

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