



Broadening the conversation: Israel Friendship League elects unlikely leaders

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The two newest leaders on the board of the S.F. chapter of the America-Israel Friendship League are unlikely candidates for the job.

They're not Jewish, and they have never been to Israel.

"So it would seem that I wouldn't care," said Matt Hansen, the new board president, with a chuckle.

But that assumption would be wrong, he added.

"I've always been involved with youth programming," Hansen said. "With AIFL, once I saw how transforming the experience [of going to Israel] is for the kids, I couldn't help but stay involved."

AIFL is a 30-year-old nonsectarian organization that sponsors "people-to-people exchanges" to enhance U.S.-Israel relations. Its signature initiative is the Youth Ambassador program, which each year sends 100 public school students to New York and Israel to learn about diversity and coexistence with Israeli peers.

Hansen began working with the AIFL board of directors somewhat accidentally. In 2003, the student exchange was almost canceled because the San Francisco Unified School District couldn't find solid trip insurance.

Enter Hansen, who at the time was the district's director for risk management. He secured the proper insurance so the students could go to Israel.

Meanwhile, Frank Tom, then the assistant superintendent of high schools for SFUSD, was already an active board member of AIFL. He joined the board when he saw how much students valued the youth exchange in Israel. Tom asked Hansen to attend a board meeting. And then he asked again, until Hansen had also joined the board.

Hansen took over the leadership role Feb. 4, following Frances Berger, who served as president for 10 years. Tom, who is currently the superintendent of the Lafayette Unified School District, is the new vice president.

This is the third time AIFL has had a non-Jewish board president. Others were Doris Ward, city and county assessor for San Francisco, and Louise Renne, an attorney.

“Many of the people on our board as well as in community leadership positions who otherwise would have nothing to do with Israel are finding the San Francisco chapter of AIFL a place where they can express their creative passions around Israel,” said Jane Falk, a Jewish consultant from Berkeley and a new AIFL board member.

Falk credits Wendy Kenin, AIFL chapter director, with helping connect such a wide variety of individuals. Kenin is an Orthodox mother of four who lives in Berkeley and was recently appointed to the city’s Peace and Justice Commission (where many of the anti-Israel propositions presented to the city council originate).

“She has miraculously brought together leaders from so many seemingly oppositional positions, and they are coming together around Israel,” Falk said. “If Wendy had her way, the polarization of peoples for and against Israel would become the center of a massive social convergence.”

Uri Bar-Ner, former Israeli ambassador to Turkey, visited the San Francisco chapter Feb. 4. He told the board members that he thinks this is “very significant.”

“I’ve been telling my friends in Israel that I have not seen, in all my travels around the United States, any chapter or group of AIFL supporters with such diverse leadership like here,” he said.

Now that Tom works in the Lafayette schools, he’s looking at the success of the San Francisco chapter as a model for launching a similar program in an East Bay school district. Falk said she’s thrilled that Tom wants to bring the program across the bay.

Berkeley especially needs to “reframe the conversation,” Falk said, by highlighting how Israel has approached coexistence “to influence the way Israel is analyzed, and build alliances with the ‘other side.’”

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