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Death of Schaefer '13 devastates community

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Correction appended.

Soldier, student, leader — these are some of the words that define the life of Avi Schaefer '13.

The son of Rabbi Arthur Gross-Schaefer and Laurie Gross-Schaefer, of Santa Barbara, Calif., Schaefer and his twin brother, Yoav, served in the Israeli Defense Forces. After three years of service, Schaefer came to Brown, where he planned to pursue concentrations in international relations and Middle Eastern studies.

Before coming to Brown and while on campus, Schaefer was dedicated to promoting peace and understanding in the Middle East. A leader among his peers, Schaefer had a vision for the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations, a vision embodied in his academic work and participation in College Hill's Jewish community.

"Avi didn't wait. He knew that Brown would go by quickly," said University Chaplain Janet Cooper Nelson. "I just love the fact that even in the short time he was with us, how much of an impact he made."

A promising peacemaker

For Sami Jarbawi '12, Schaefer was an unexpected friend.

Schaefer allowed Jarbawi, a Palestinian student who grew up in the West Bank, "to break so many cultural constraints," he said. "He was a catalyst — now he's gone."

Jarbawi met Schaefer early last fall on less-than-friendly terms. The two both attended the year's first meeting of Common Ground, an organization for students to discuss the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At that first meeting, Jarbawi got into an argument with Schaefer. Though the two saw one another at the group's subsequent meetings, they did not become friendly until Jarbawi was a teaching assistant for an introductory Arabic course that Schaefer took.

"One day he came up to me and said, 'Sami, I want to have coffee with you.' That was the beginning point," Jarbawi said.

Their friendship grew when Professor of Judaic Studies David Jacobson invited the pair to his office, Jarbawi said. Jacobson was interested in pursuing an Undergraduate Teaching and Research Award with the two students that would examine narratives from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"There's just a uniqueness about having an Israeli and a Palestinian citizen working together — they come from two groups that have a problematic relationship," Jacobson said.

"I was delighted that the two of them had this open mind, and they really became friends," he said. "It was quite a thing to see."

Though it has yet to be approved, both Jarbawi and Jacobson want to continue the project in Schaefer's memory.

"I spoke to his father on the phone, and he told me to continue what Avi did — to continue on working on peace on this dialogue. I gave my word to continue with this project. I don't think there's any leaving — I'll do whatever it takes," Jarbawi said.

Schaefer first came to Jacobson's attention in November when Schaefer wrote an opinions column in The Herald titled "To those interested in creating peace in the Middle East."

"I am here, ready and anxiously waiting for you to work with me, not against me," Schaefer wrote at the end of his column. "Do not give me another reason to lose hope, because my patience is sadly running out." He ended by quoting Isaiah 2:4, "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

The column echoed many of Jacobson's own long-held beliefs. "All the time I've been part of the faculty at Brown, I've been concerned about the way we talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," he said. The debate on campus is one that involves students and faculty members "choosing sides, and not listening to one another — arguing for one side, and not hearing the other side," Jacobson said.

"With Avi I thought, 'Here's an undergraduate who shares a lot of the concerns that I do.' "

An inspiring idealist

Nir Knoller, a soldier who served with Schaefer in the Israeli army, observed his friend's maturity, leadership and sense of purpose firsthand.

Schaefer was the first person to greet Knoller when he arrived in Israel and made him feel "at home in a group that had already been together for about 3 months," wrote Knoller, who is currently in Israel, in instant messages to The Herald.

Schaefer's gifts as a leader made him a role model for the other soldiers. "We all sort of looked to Avi for answers to everything, and he always had something important and wise to answer you," Knoller wrote.

Three years later, as a 21-year-old freshman living in Keeney Quadrangle, Schaefer "had a way of getting people to follow him," said Joshua Deshais '12, his residential counselor.

Since his death, students have hung Israeli flags around Keeney, Deshaies said, demonstrating the level of respect Schaefer's peers had for him. "It's a perfect example of the community coming together," he said.

One member of Deshaies' freshman unit, Gabi Lewis '13, is helping Schaefer's family compile a book called "Letters to Avi." Reminiscences and thoughts on Schaefer's life can be e-mailed to Lewis, he said.

Knoller, along with fellow soldier Stuart Oden, created a Facebook group called "RIP Avi Schaefer" to honor his friend. The group currently has about 2,600 members.

The page is a way to commemorate Schaefer's vision for peace in the Middle East, Knoller wrote. "It's sad to know that Avi was taken from us, but in his life, he has laid down the foundation for peace in the future."

Building bridges

Respect for Schaefer as a student leader is evident throughout the Brown community. In honor of Schaefer's death, the opening of the student-run Israeli Film Festival has been postponed until later this week, said Danya Chudacoff '11, one of the festival's directors.

"He was able to accomplish in a short time here more than most people can achieve in a lifetime," Chudacoff said.

Schaefer was a person who inspired others to cause change, collaborating with other student leaders to prove that "he wasn't a

one-man show. He was working with people at all times," she said. "He was moving people from the moment he got here," she added.

Just last weekend, Schaefer organized a benefit party for Haiti. "It's people like Avi who can bring a community together and get things accomplished," said Troy Shapiro '10, who gave Schaefer advice as he planned the party.

The people Schaefer brought together were often those "who would be perceived as opposite, and enemies," said Rabbi Mordechai Rackover, associate University chaplain for the Jewish community.

At the memorial service held for Schaefer at Brown/RISD Hillel on Friday night, Cooper Nelson saw "a bond of Brown family members across lines," she said.

Schaefer's gift for bridging the gap between two sides of a conflict also helped Knoller, Schaefer's fellow soldier, look at his opposition differently.

"When I first came to Israel to volunteer in the army, it was to protect my country from 'the enemy,'" Knoller wrote. "I learned from Avi and his father that 'an enemy is just someone (whose) story you haven't heard yet.' "

"It's very difficult to have been able to cross bridges and cross to the other side," Rackover said. "Avi was not just a dreamer, but a doer."

Knoller wrote that he and Schaefer's other companions from the army "will definitely work toward building that future he so wanted. That better world."

A never-ending debate

Jarbawi was with Schaefer 11 minutes before he died. Heading back to College Hill together from downtown Providence, Jarbawi said he had no idea that the next day, life at Brown would be so different.

Jarbawi received a call at 9:30 a.m. from an acquaintance who also knew Schaefer. "I didn't believe it," he said. "It didn't hit me all day until the 6 p.m. memorial service at Hillel" on Friday.

The sophomore planned to live with Schaefer this summer as they worked on their research with Jacobson — a project that promised Jarbawi a chance to learn more about his unlikely friend.

"He was mysterious. He had a bright smile and could charm anyone, but there was a lot underneath. There's a lot I wanted to learn," said Jarwabi, who is currently in California for the funeral services.

The friends' last e-mail exchange ended the same way their first meeting began — with a debate.

Schaefer sent Jarbawi an editorial from the Jerusalem Post about a recent speech by Palestinian National Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. "I told Avi I needed to see the speech itself before I made a response. The Jerusalem Post is not the most credible source for this," he said.

Schaefer did not reveal his own opinion on the speech to his friend. "Dialogue is a two-way speech," Jarbawi said. "I told him, 'I want your point of view.'" Schaefer "rarely shared his point of view — that's part of his mystery," Jarbawi said.

"But he wanted to learn — to put his feet in the Palestinian man's shoes and understand the Palestinian person," he said. "People like him are necessary."

A simulcast of Avi Schaefer's '13 funeral in Los Angeles will be broadcast at Brown/RISD Hillel, 80 Brown St., at 2 p.m. today, preceded by opening remarks at 1:45 p.m. A few words and a short candle-lighting ceremony will follow the simulcast.

Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this article incorrectly described Troy Shapiro '10 as one of the planners of a benefit party for Haiti organized by Avi Schaefer '13. In fact, Shapiro was not directly involved in planning the event, though Schaefer solicited his advice during the planning process, according to Shapiro. The Herald regrets the error.

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