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Crossing Lines

By ELIZABETH RAU | February 24, 2010

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BEYOND THE CONFLICT Jarbawi.

The morning he found out that Avi Schaefer was dead, Sami Jarbawi thought of all the things the two men had hoped to do together and now wouldn't — cook, run, maybe hike. Along the way, they would teach a skeptical world how a Palestinian and an Israeli soldier can make peace.

Schaefer, the Brown University student recently killed by a suspected drunk driver on the streets of Providence, left behind hundreds of friends, including soldiers in the Israeli army, with whom he served for three years before coming to Brown.

But perhaps one of his more compelling friendships was with Jarbawi, a 20-year-old Brown sophomore and Palestinian who says the bond he forged with Schaefer was nothing short of remarkable.

"The extraordinary thing is that the friendship managed to go beyond the conflict, to just take place, to crystallize, to just be friends, which takes a lot of guts and courage," Jarbawi says. "We put the conflict aside."

Police say Daniel Gilcreast, 23, of North Providence, struck Schaefer and another Brown student as they were walking in the breakdown lane at Thayer and Barnes streets about 1:45 am on February 12. The other student, a woman, was treated for injuries at the hospital and discharged. Gilcreast was arraigned for driving under the influence, death resulting, and driving under the influence, causing serious bodily injury, and released on \$25,000 surety bail, under the condition that he doesn't drive or drink alcohol.

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The death of Schaefer, who would've been 22 in June, was especially upsetting for Jarbawi, who says the two had been socializing with friends that night downtown and parted ways on College Hill only 11 minutes before the 911 call. The next morning, a student told him the awful news, but it didn't sink in until he went to the Hillel Center later that day and saw hundreds of students in despair: "I knew then he was gone."

Jarbawi, tall and reed-thin with jet black hair cut short, grew up in Ramallah, the political capital of the West Bank. He remembers evacuating his grade school during an Israeli bombing, watching Israeli tanks patrol his neighborhood and, during one of the many curfews, running through the mountains to reach his Quaker school. When he was 15, he left his home to attend a Quaker high school outside Philadelphia and eventually landed at Brown.

Schaefer, also tall and fit with dark hair, showed an independent streak as well when he left his family in Santa Barbara, California after graduating from high school and volunteered as a soldier in the Israeli Defense Force, where he was a counterterrorism instructor. (His identical twin brother, Yoav, joined too.) Schaefer started Brown as a freshman only this fall.

The men first met about six months ago at Common Ground, a student club that promotes debate about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. One night, they both spoke to the group and, not surprisingly, disagreed. "We didn't leave the meeting as friends," Jarbawi says. "We left the meeting as a Palestinian and an Israeli would leave a meeting."

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