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75 years of uniting the world

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Two years ago, Daniel Benoliel, a law student from Israel, happened to sit down at dinner next to Ziad Nakat, an engineering student from Lebanon. It didn't take them long to start arguing about the Middle East.

The setting was UC Berkeley's International House, founded 75 years ago to encourage just such encounters.

Over the next few weeks, their arguments grew more heated, but a curious thing also happened: They started to develop a grudging respect for each other.

Finally, Ziad said, "Why don't we formalize this? Let's start a debate club."

We still have political differences, but we started to see each other's point of view.

Since then, I-House, as its residents call it, has hosted debates twice a month on practically every controversial topic on the planet, including Israel vs. Palestine, China vs. Tibet, India vs. Pakistan, the Iraq war, multi-cultural relationships, and same-sex marriages.

Attendance is usually standing room only.

And, of course, Ziad and Daniel have become close friends.

"We talk about everything — girlfriends, school, you name it," said Ziad. "We still have political differences, but we've started to see each other's point of view. We've also become more critical of excesses on our own side."

Such sentiments would have pleased Harry Edmonds, the man who founded the first International House in New York after a chance encounter on the steps of Columbia University library. Passing a Chinese student, Edmonds casually said, "Good morning."

Startled, the man blurted, "I've been in New York three weeks, and you are the first person who has spoken to me."

Moved by this experience, Edmonds and his wife started holding teas and Sunday suppers in their home in an attempt to counter the loneliness and isolation foreign students face.

In 1924, thanks to a \$1.8 million gift from John D. Rockefeller Jr., Edmonds opened the first International House in New York, a place where foreign and American students could share day-to-day living experiences, without any restrictions on sex, creed or color.

That led to problems in 1928, when the second International House was founded in Berkeley. Many Berkeleyans were outraged that black people and white people would be living together. More than 800 turned out at an angry rally to protest construction of the integrated I-House.

Undaunted, Edmonds chose the most in-your-face site he could find: the corner of Piedmont and Bancroft, in the heart of

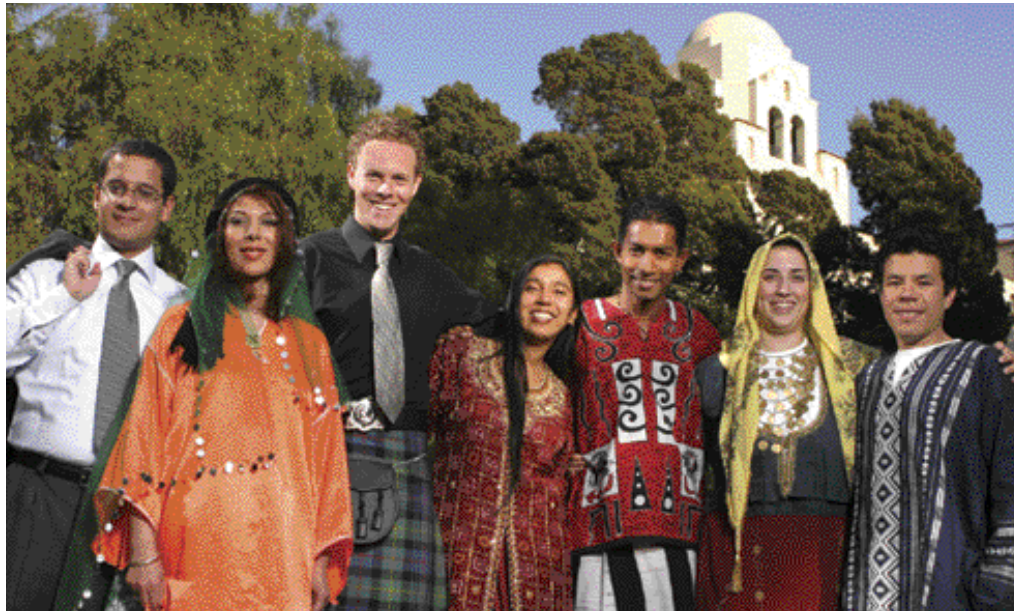


Photo: Jim Black

notoriously segregated fraternity row. He explained he wanted to strike bigotry "right hard in the nose."

Despite the protests, I-House opened on Aug. 18, 1930, in a Spanish Colonial Revival building whose design purposely reflects the Moorish influence on Spanish culture. This week it kicks off a two-year celebration of that event with the publication of a new book, "Close Encounters of a Cross-Cultural Kind," chronicling the highlights of its first 75 years.

Many I-House residents went on to notable careers, including economist John Kenneth Galbraith, mountaineer Arlene Blum, sports agent Leigh Steinberg, former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Butto, former California Chief Justice Rose Bird, four Nobel laureates (Owen Chamberlain, Glenn Seaborg, Willis Lamb and Sir Geoffrey Wilkinson), and two governors of California (Pete Wilson and Jerry Brown).

Another was a Canadian student named Ken Taylor, who, when he grew up and became his country's ambassador to Teheran, smuggled several Americans to freedom during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis.

Several I-House alums returned Oct. 16 to preview the anniversary celebrations and reminisce.

"It was the most exciting year of my life," said Surjit Randhava, an Indian student who lived in I-House during the 1964-65 academic year. "I got to see new things, eat new foods, meet new people. I also did a little bit of studying — but not too much."

It was an eye-opener for the American residents, too.

"I'll never forget the question an Arab student asked me one day," said Warren Roberts of Davis, who lived in I-House in the late '50s. "He asked me, 'What do you think of the Aga Khan?' All I knew about the Aga Khan was that his son, Aly, was constantly portrayed in Life magazine as a playboy. I was ashamed of my shallowness. I think that's what made me decide to go into the Peace Corps."

From the start, students from mutually hostile countries have lived at I-House cheek

by jowl, on the theory that understanding has to start somewhere.

"It doesn't happen overnight," said Joe Lurie, I-House's executive director. "It's the small, everyday things, like doing your laundry together, that eventually lead to much bigger ones."

Neville Mathias, who grew up in Madras, India, agreed.

"The person who wound up being my best friend was a guy from Pakistan.

"He spoke Urdu and I spoke Hindi, so at first we communicated in English.

"But the more we compared notes, we eventually discover that our languages are almost identical. It hadn't occurred to us because his is written in Arabic and mine is written in Sanskrit."

To celebrate its 75th anniversary, I-House is soliciting "birthday presents" from alumni and friends to bring the building up to 21st-century standards.

"The showers and restrooms haven't been overhauled since the building was built," said Lurie.

He's also looking for donations to the new Gateway Fellowship Program — a partnership between I-House, UC Berkeley, and the Graduate Division — which offers selected students full funding. I-House provides free room and board, the university waives all tuition and fees, and the Graduate Division provides a \$5,000 stipend.

Currently, five American and four foreign students are at Cal on Gateway Fellowships, and Lurie hopes to eventually raise the number to 25.

Ziad still lives in I-House, where he's grooming younger residents to take over the debate club after he gets his doctorate next spring.

Daniel moved to New York this fall to continue his legal studies.

"But we stay in constant e-mail contact," said Ziad. "And he always signs his, 'Your Jewish brother.'"

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