Peace to Beirut with All My Heart

By Ryan Farha, Class of 2008

A year's exploration in a reborn city had scarcely begun when Lebanon's fragile peace crumbled.

I had arrived in Beirut on June 26, eagerly anticipating the year I was to spend studying at the American University of Beirut. I was enrolled in an intensive Arabic language program for the summer, to be followed by a year of liberal arts courses in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

I was not a complete stranger to the city. My father, a doctor who fled Lebanon after the Israeli invasion of 1982, had brought me and my family there several times before. I have spent most of the day in class, beyond my expectations. Nevertheless, I was excited to finally explore the country on my own.

Beirut went above and beyond my expectations. The Arabic language program was truly intensive. We spent most of the day in class, received several hours' worth of homework, and our teachers spoke to us almost exclusively in Arabic. Still, my evenings were free to explore the charm and craziness of the city's rebirth following the years of war it had seen. I wandered through marketplaces, past cafes and courtyards, and visited countless restaurants and street vendors, devouring chicken shawarma, baba ghanouj, falafel and other Lebanese delicacies.

Although it is nestled on the tranquil Mediterranean Sea, Beirut pulsates with energy at night. My classmates and I frequented the city's hotspots, visiting nightclubs with names like Crystal, Taboo and Starlet. Beirut's charms kept us constantly busy; I can hardly recall an idle moment.

While the Israeli armed forces gained steam, just as it geared up for its most bustling years of peace and progress that had grown in Beirut, the road from the airport passes through grimy shantytowns, congested urban areas, and finally reaches the pristine downtown district, built with the dollars of wealthy Gulf Arabs and other investors. Walking down the street, one could pass gorgeous, scantily clad Lebanese women locking arms with their completely veiled friends and family members. The city is a fragile compromise between tolerant Western liberalism and the conservative, religious and family-oriented society of the Middle East.

Because of my admiration for attachment to the city, my first impulse was to mourn for Beirut's seemingly unavoidable fate when I heard the Israeli bombs dropping. It was as if Israel were not attacking Lebanon itself, but unraveling the 15-plus years of peace and progress that had grown since fighting ceased in the 1980s. Lebanon had flourished into a safe and attractive vacation hotspot during the past 20 years, and just as it geared up for its most bustling and profitable summer in years, violence penetrated its borders, infecting Beirut's still fragile, carefree atmosphere.

The following day was perhaps the closest moment briefing on how Lebanon had seen far more appalling catastrophes, and that these kinds of “events” were “normal” in the country. Several days later, as bombs fell closer and closer to the university, classes were finally canceled, though even then, some fearless instructors held impromptu Arabic sessions. Violence is nothing new to Lebanon. The country has suffered through conflict and warfare with Israel and other Middle Eastern powers, and the Lebanese have adapted to the persistence of aggression that plagues their country. During the five days of the conflict I experienced, I learned a great deal about the Lebanese people and how they survived decades of war. They would do anything possible to downplay the threat, or find ways to forget about the impending danger. As bombs fell right and left, life in Beirut continued.

One night a few of us were walking toward a nearby cafe called Paradise when we clearly heard at least four shells fired, most likely from the Israeli shrapnel. The bomb did not hit. We fell right and left, life in Beirut continued. Even I fell into their tradition of willful disregard for the breaching violence, continuing my life as normal. One of my classes was canceled, my friends and I, instead of sitting in our dorm rooms and waiting, played soccer, ate whatever food we could get our hands on, partied all night on our dorm’s balconies, and woke up for places to go out near the university.

The next day the Israelis attempted another leaflet drop at the university. The canister burst this time, but the leaflets all fluttered into the Mediterranean. It was fairly symbolic, I believe, of the failed propaganda campaign waged by the Israelis. In the first leaflet drop, the canister did not work properly. In the second drop, the canister worked but missed its target. Either way, the Lebanese were not going to accept Israeli propaganda as long as their bombs continued to pound the country.

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Despite their pessimism about the coming days, life continued for the Lebanese. The day before I was evacuated, some of my relatives picked me up and drove me across Beirut (parts of which were being bombed) to their apartment to have a pleasant lunch. Their apartment afforded a wonderful view of the southern suburbs, the primary target for the Israeli bombs. Between courses of fattoush, grape leaves and kibbe, remarkably loud bursts went off periodically as puffs of smoke rose in the distance, in plain view through the balcony doors.

Following the meal, my great-aunt drove me back to my dorm, and while it was strange in itself to be driving through a city under attack, what amazed me was the fact that she insisted we stop on the way to buy a box of pastries. When I bashfully insisted that it was not necessary, and hunger was not the continued on page 85
Sloop’s colleagues at Vanderbilt are also lost works with a transnational group of characters who reflect all sorts of questions of age, race, gender and even size politics,” says Sloop. “Other shows aren’t so explicitly tied to these questions.”

The question of gender and the media is one that has long interested Sloop. His book Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture was published by The University of Massachusetts Press in 2004. He is currently working on a project that investigates the relationship between gender, sexuality, citizenship and transportation technologies (such as DVD players in cars) as media. The first essay emerging from this work will be published in Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, a respected professional journal for which Sloop has been named editor-elect for volumes to be published between 2007 and 2009.

Sloop also is co-author with Kent A. Ono of Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration and California’s Proposition 187, published by Temple University Press in 2002. “John’s approach to rhetorical studies is unique,” says Ono, director and professor of Asian American studies and professor of the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. “While deeply grounded within classical rhetorical studies, his approach acknowledges, indeed nuances, post-structural and cultural studies approaches to the discipline.”

Sloop also is professor of mass communications and cultural studies, among many faculty at Vanderbilt in various fields because he is a sharp intellect who ranges widely as a thinker and critic. “Sloop’s far-ranging interests, aside from his work on television and its influences, include Marlon Brando, Thelonius Monk and Iowa Buckeye basketball, to name a few. His ability to relate among many faculty at Vanderbilt in various fields because he is a sharp intellect who ranges widely as a thinker and critic. “Sloop’s far-ranging interests, aside from his work on television and its influences, include Marlon Brando, Thelonius Monk and Iowa Buckeye basketball, to name a few. His ability to relate among many faculty at Vanderbilt in various fields because he is a sharp intellect who ranges widely as a thinker and critic. “Sloop’s far-ranging interests, aside from his work on television and its influences, include Marlon Brando, Thelonius Monk and Iowa Buckeye basketball, to name a few. His ability to relate...