

Gulf war unites Arab community

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

In Westland, elderly Arab women are wearing only black — symbolic of perpetual mourning.

In Birmingham, a young woman of Iraqi descent has become a social activist, soliciting funds to buy medicine for victims of war in Iraq.

In Livonia and Southfield, members of Arab-American organizations scramble to fill growing demands for public speakers on the Middle East.

Elsewhere throughout the metropolitan area, citizens of Arab heritage cope with the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm, a tragedy referred to more often than not as a holocaust.

"There are many strategies for coping, including denial, trying to forget, anger and frustration," said Nabeel Abraham, an American-born Palestinian who teaches anthropology at Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn.

Feelings, he added, are fueled by a sense of double standards employed by the U.S. government. "We support occupations by certain countries, Israel in the West Bank and Golan Heights and Turkey in Cyprus, but then use the same standard to destroy the infrastructure of Iraq."

Earlier this week, Abraham addressed the issue during a public forum at Christ Church Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills, one of the numerous requests to speak he has received in recent months.

As a representative of the Arab-American community, he tells audiences "we are really many communities of differing Arab heritages rolled into one."

"GROWING PAINS of tragedy," is how Christine Oram of Birmingham describes the feelings she has experienced since the outbreak of hostilities last August. Oram came to the United States from Iraq 20 years ago. A brother, visiting relatives there, left the country only days before allied bombs started falling in mid-January.

Acting on those feelings, she helped organize Victims of War, her first venture into public activism. Later this month, she and others from the group will carry medical supplies to Baghdad.

Oram is not alone in her efforts, according to Abraham, who said the war has "energized" many Arab Americans into new activity.

"This is our holocaust," Oram said. "It's not an issue to take lightly. I have never felt so deeply or so determined about something. It's so close to my heart."

VOW, she added, is "a people-to-people crusade, a people-to-people mission," a united effort resulting in a growing coalition between various Arab factions here.

Tom George of West Bloomfield, a member of the Chaldean-Iraqi Association of Michigan, concurs. "Today, compared to seven months ago, there is a definite solidifying within the entire (Arab-American) community, a sense we are all working closer together."

Previously, Chaldeans sought anonymity, according to George, because "we are relatively new to this country and we didn't want to bother anyone."

"THIS WAR HAS TAUGHT us a big lesson. We have to be organized and professional. We have to get the word out, let people know who we are," Chaldeans now seek active alliances with other area organizations, he said.

May Berry, a college student active in the Arab Community Center in Dearborn, said that in addition to a growing relation between Chaldean and other Arab groups, there is also growing interest in Arab heritage by the general public.

"We've certainly seen an increased interest in traditions, customs and Islam, and requests for films, seminars and speakers from people wanting to know more about us."

"I feel positive about it, but it's unfortunate this didn't happen before the war. People were so ignorant."

Recent events have been trying for Berry, whose family is Lebanese. "I don't feel a sense of military vic-

tory and the euphoria afterwards has been very difficult for me."

"I'm pleased our numbers of killed were so low, but we don't know the number of Iraqis who were killed. We may never know. I can't forget that." Like many others, Berry copes by burying herself in volunteer work. Presently she is raising funds for VOW.

THE MOST unsettling matter to many Arab Americans in the aftermath of the war is the fate of relatives and friends still unaccounted for in Iraq and Kuwait.

Several days weekly, Mariann

Saleed travels from her Wayne County home to Southfield where she answers the phone for VOW.

"I do this to help myself," said Saleed whose husband, Khalid, and two children, Adam, 9, and Adora, 5, have been missing in Iraq since a final phone call on Jan. 12. Phones have not worked since bombing began on Jan. 16.

"I don't watch TV news anymore. I don't want to see my kids begging for food." It helps, she said, being around others who share a similar plight. Callers from throughout the U.S. and Canada phone the VOW office, people frantic with worry about

the fate of relatives in Iraq.

"It's pretty sad. The women usually start crying. They tell you about their dreams. I try to reassure them. I think it helps when they know I'm waiting too."

The situation is less desperate in Kuwait, where Palestinians charged with siding with Saddam Hussein have been under siege by angry Kuwaitis. Phone service is again working.

Still, "conditions are not the best and we're pretty worried," said Samia Tawil of the Union of Palestinian Women's Association in Chicago.

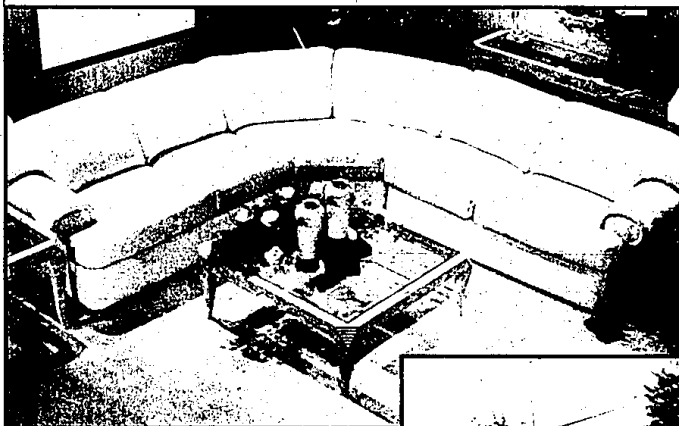


Christine Oram with comedian Casey Kasem during a recent fund-raising event for the Arab Center in Wayne County.

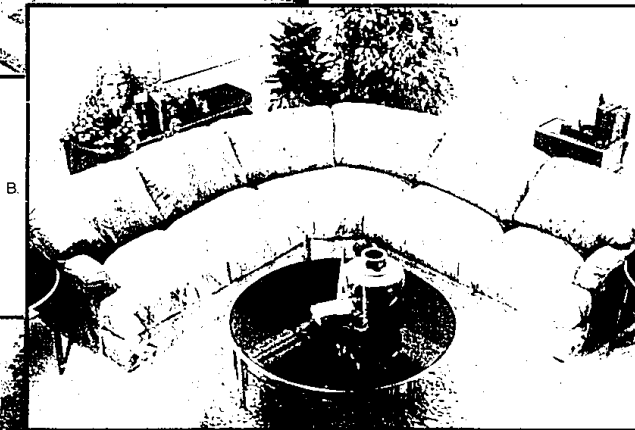
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Sheriff ready for auction

The Oakland County Sheriff's Department hosts its annual spring auction of recovered stolen property and surplus county property, 9:30 a.m. Saturday, May 11, at the county central garage, 1200 North Telegraph, Pontiac.

Included in the sale are name brand tools, bicycles, stereo equipment and jewelry. Sixty late-model vehicles will also be included, including Chevrolet patrol cars, Pontiac, Buick and Oldsmobile passenger cars, and GMC and Chevrolet vans and pickups.

Vehicles can be viewed and inspected 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday and Friday, May 9 and 10. All other items may be viewed the day of the sale. Gates open at 8 a.m.