



PONDERING A POINT—SDSU President Stephen Weber considers his answer to a question during an interview at the Dan Hotel in Tel Aviv, where the 10th anniversary conference of the Peres Center for Peace was conducted.

THE JEWISH CITIZEN

SDSU's Weber expresses admiration for Peres Peace Center, Hillel Foundation

By Donald H. Harrison



TEL AVIV--San Diego State University President Stephen Weber has expressed admiration for the way the Peres Peace Center has reached out to Palestinian citizens in a variety of endeavors, and also for the way that two Hillel branches back in San Diego have decided to coordinate their fundraising campaigns to build new headquarters near the UCSD and SDSU campuses.

Weber was interviewed this week at the conclusion of a three-day

conference sponsored by the 10-year-old Peres Peace Center, of which he is a member of the Board of Governors. Not having been in Israel for the last five years, the university president said "I think in many ways it is healthier and stronger than it was the last time I was here. It certainly is reaching more and more people which is critical, and they have broadened their interests into things like sports and medicine and so forth.

"The thing that I feel has moved the most in that regard is the relationships which though well in hand ten years ago were largely political. Now they are much more people-to-people... and, quite frankly, a lot of the political contacts have dead ended at the moment." San Diego State University's own involvement in building peace among Israelis, Palestinians and other Arab neighbors has been the promotion of their cooperation in the production of food crops, sharing of agricultural information and technologies, and most recently, in the development of a concept of creating a blended Palestinian-Israeli olive oil.

"The concept is to take a traditional product of both the Palestinians and the Israelis and literally blend them, and also figuratively blend them, so that you share in the venture equally as partners," Weber said. "Palestinian olive oil tends to be a heavy robust olive oil while Israeli olive oil is lighter and they blend very nicely together--what we think would be an attractive product around the world; certainly in the United States and Europe."

"We are approaching this as a viable business, but it is the kind of business that the profits of it will go to support peace efforts, so it will be a good thing," Weber said. "It will bring business opportunities to both Israelis and Palestinians. The business opportunities will not only be for the olive farmers but also for the bottler and the label designer and the label manufacturer – all of these kinds of things will be involved. One of the many models for this kind of enterprise is Ben and Jerry's , which is a (ice cream) corporation that has devoted a large portion of its profits to good work ...

"What I like most of all is that they (Palestinian and Israeli farmers) have come up with a concrete product.... For many years, they had a lot of good conversations here and we developed mutual understanding and respect, but it is hard for the rest of the world to see anything tangible from this. Now, there will be a blended olive oil and there will be many other products similar to the olive oil that we imagine developing as well. And people will be able to fully understand what this peace movement is by purchasing this olive oil." The SDSU president credited Bonnie Stewart, the executive director of the Hansen Institute for World Peace, and Sandy Ehrlich, Qualcomm Executive Director of SDSU's Entrepreneurial Management Center, for helping to develop the cooperative agricultural program which he said not only benefits the Middle Eastern partners but SDSU as well.

"The old model of the university was a castle around which you built a moat, and you protected its purity from external influences and heathens wherever they might be," Weber noted.

"The modern university is much different. We are in an open world and we have to prepare our students for it; they need to have all these kinds of experiences. San Diego State (is) second in the country among all doctoral institutions with students abroad. This is all part of that same thing. They will be working and living in a global setting and they need that experience so every chance we get to do these things of this sort..." is all to the good, Weber added.

The SDSU president applauded the decision by the Hillel chapters at SDSU and UCSD to launch a common fundraising effort to build new headquarters at the respective campuses. While there has been no opposition to the planned headquarters close to SDSU, La Jolla residents have opposed in public hearings and court suits the construction of a Hillel campus

adjacent to the UCSD campus.

“If the two institutions proceeded on separate fundraising campaigns, it would inevitably compromise the other institution’s fundraising, so whoever went first would compromise whoever went second,” Weber noted. A joint campaign “is much better since the people who are supporting Hillel are really interested, I think, mostly in supporting young people understand their faith, not so much whether they are at San Diego State or at UCSD. What a good and constructive thing!”

Furthermore, he said, “there is absolutely no reason why people who want to support Hillel at UCSD should not have a vehicle with which to do this, but conversely if San Diego State is ready to go, we don’t have to wait.”

Weber described Hillel as potentially an important component in a Jewish student’s university’s experience.

“The work of universities is human growth and development,” he explained. “That just doesn’t take place in the classroom; we are dealing with whole human beings, often at very formative moments of their lives, often away from home for the first time, away from their synagogue for the first time, away from the friends that they have known .

“Religion, not for all of our students, but for many of our students is an important element of who they are. So we want to make sure they have an opportunity to continue their growth and development “as well as to have a place to socialize.

“Also the particularly nice thing about Hillel –when you think about how people come to their own religious points of view – it is not just the synagogue , but also the family,” Weber added. “All of a sudden you are away both from the synagogue and the family, and you have to figure out what it is that you buy for yourself.” At Hillel, he said, there are “people who are not proselytizing but who are there to help and respond.”

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