



JMU senior fights terrorism with knowledge

In today's world, when America is at war with Iraq and in the midst of another seemingly unending war with terrorism, uncertainty about what will happen next is on everyone's minds. However, for those living in the Middle East, terrorism is a daily reality. Last August, senior Jose Gonzales and 26 other American students visited Israel to experience the dangers of the area and to bring back personal knowledge to educate their peers. Gonzales found the country to be "incredibly fascinating - the culture, people and languages," but also called it an "extremely volatile place."

Gonzales, an international affairs major, was selected for a one-year anti-terrorism fellowship program by the nonprofit Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington, D.C. The fellowship included the 17-day trip to Israel and continues throughout the 2002-03 academic year, as Gonzales works to "increase awareness about terrorism at JMU."

He decided to participate in the fellowship, even though his friends and family told him that he was "crazy" and didn't want him to travel to the Middle East. Israel has been plagued by suicide bombers and terrorist attacks for years, and has been at war with neighboring Palestine for decades. President of JMU's International Student Association, Gonzales has always been interested in foreign affairs and felt that the trip would be a good experience. Right before the fellows were scheduled to leave, Hebrew University was bombed, killing seven people, including five Americans. After much debate, 27 of the 32 fellows decided to go on the trip, which Gonzales says shows the "resolve and commitment of the students."

Once they arrived in Israel, the students stayed at the University of Tel Aviv and heard speeches about terrorism from government officials, academic experts, military personnel and a suicide-bombing victim. "People do go on. Despite the fear, they keep living normal lives," Gonzales discovered. "The beaches are crowded and people continue with daily routines like working and going to the market, but when you're at the market, your bags are checked for explosives. Israeli people are very friendly and open to Americans. Since the Israeli economy is based primarily on tourism, it's been devastated in the past few years. Israelis are friendly to anyone there to spend money, shop and eat in their restaurants."

After visiting Israel, Gonzales "came home with a totally different perspective." He organized JMU's Sept. 11, 2002 Day of Remembrance ceremony, including an Interfaith Prayer Service, noon ringing of the Wilson Hall bells, a Quad flag ceremony with Taps and a moment of silence, and a candlelight vigil on The Commons.

To increase awareness about terrorism in the community, Gonzales arranged for Avi Jorisch, a Soref fellow for the Washington Institute for Near-East Policy, to lecture about the Hezbollah-Lebanon group. His future plans include fund-raising for local rescue workers and bringing more speakers to JMU. "If you educate just one person about terrorism, then that's one more person that will understand that it should never be tolerated," Gonzales says.

