

Future nurse confronts old tensions in Israel

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

ROCHESTER — Laurie Lopez is learning about tensions in the Middle East the hard way.

The 36-year-old nursing student at St. John Fisher College in is spending her summer volunteering as a nurse's aide in the Princess Basma Center for Disabled Children. The center on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem is located in an area which is largely Palestinian.

To add to this sense of tension, Lopez brought her 7-year-old daughter, Marie, along with her.

"I had no idea what it was like here and how oppressive it was for the Palestinians," Lopez said in a telephone interview from Israel. "The newspapers, the media — they don't show the children being killed. They don't show the harassment."

"There's a sense of fear," Lopez continued. "Everywhere you go, there's (Israeli) soldiers."

The only violence she has directly witnessed so far was when a Palestinian threw a bottle at a car of Israelis. Some of the shattered glass struck but did not harm Lopez.

When Lopez goes out, she does so with a group. And she does not leave the center at night. Most of the time, in fact, she and Marie remain at the center.

Although it is difficult to avoid the violence, Lopez explained that she will not become embroiled in the ongoing conflicts. Even where a person shops — a Palestinian or a Jewish store — can be taken as a political statement.

"I'm not here for that," she said of the politics. "I'm here to help."

She is helping others through a two-month commitment — from June 30 to Aug. 30 — working at the center, where she helps feed, bathe and clean



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Laurie Lopez (left) and her daughter, Marie, are spending their summer in East Jerusalem where Laurie, a nursing student, is volunteering as a nurse's aide in the Princess Basma Center for Disabled Children.

children. Most of the children have cerebral palsy.

But the political tensions affect even the work at the hospital, Lopez acknowledged.

"If this was the United States, most of these kids would not have to live here," Lopez explained. "But because of the Israeli government's restrictions on Palestinians' travel, because of the difficulty of travel, they have to live here."

Lopez's own path to the center began at St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Ave., Pittsford. After she took a world religion course at Fisher, she became interested in learning more about the Islamic faith. She told her professor, Tamara Sonn, that she would be

interested in going to the Middle East if a trip were organized. Lopez said it was Sonn who pointed her toward the Princess Basma Center.

Long before she began her studies at Fisher, Lopez said she had dreamed of traveling to foreign lands, learning about new cultures and helping other people in any way she could. She had been prevented from doing so because of family responsibilities.

Lopez had also decided that one path to help others was through nursing so she began part-time studies at Finger Lakes Community College while working as a secretary at Can-

andaigua's F.F. Thompson Hospital. She subsequently left her job to attend school full time at Fisher.

After learning about the opportunity to visit Israel, she discussed the possibility with her husband, Norm. A parishioner of Shortsville's St. Dominic Church, he was supportive of her going to Israel this summer, Lopez said, and with her taking Marie with her while he cared for the couple's other children at home.

Laurie and Marie are living in a community at the center that includes some of the nurses, as well as other volunteers. The center relies on volunteers from other nations to help with the work, Lopez said. Currently, volunteers include people from England, Scotland and Sweden.

While welcoming the volunteers, however, the center has no formal program in language or culture training, Lopez said.

"You just start doing it," Lopez said. "Basically, you watch (the nurses) and do what they do."

"You learn to smile all the time because you don't know the language," she added.

Marie, meanwhile, had some initial problems adjusting to the food, which Laurie acknowledged varies little from rice, cheese and pita bread. Now Marie is eating well and she sometimes helps with the patients. She has even befriended the head nurse's 5-year-old daughter.

When asked how she communicated with her friend, Marie explained, "I try not to speak. I'll start something, and she'll do it."

Laurie said she herself has actually adjusted well. "One nurse asked me today, 'You like Arab music, you like

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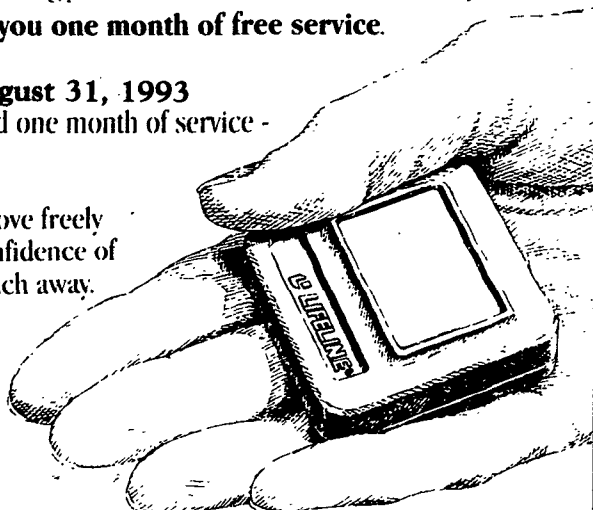
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