

# Witness Palestine Film Festival Partnership Project: Third Presbyterian and Penfield Presbyterian Churches

## 2022 Mission Collaboration Grant Report

### Grant Background

The grant that was awarded was a collaborative effort of the Penfield and Third Presbyterian Churches. The generous \$1000 grant from the Presbytery of the Genesee Valley helped to pay the rent of the Little Theater for four Rochester Witness for Palestine film showings/after film discussions. These shows were in October 2022.

The Witness Palestine Film Festival (WPF) works each year to bring films to the Rochester community that bring the 75 year old plight of our Palestinian brothers and sisters into full view. We choose films that educate and hopefully transform people's hearts and minds such that they take action. The 2022 films were: "Blue Box" which provided history around the Palestinian resettlement and subsequent destruction of Palestinian towns. The movie "Boycott" described how 3 innocent people have been vilified for their boycotting of Israeli products here in America. The movie "Journey of Others" showed the persistence that many Palestinians have in working hard to meet goals. In this case a group of actors worked to bring their play, about Palestinian suffering, to New York City. These three movies are documentaries. The fourth movie "Huda's Salon", while a feature film, showed real situations and showed how innocent people are used and abused, even by their own neighbors in Palestine. It is our fervent hope that hearts and minds were changed with the showing of the four films. Many people who attended the films signed up for the WPF email list to receive information about future films and for Rochester Witness for Palestine (RW4P) events.



Approximately 400 people attended the 4 movies. 121 of those people rated the movies on the comment cards that were handed out. Of those, 103 people rated the movies with 5 stars, 11 rated the movies with 4 stars and 7 rated the movies with 3 stars. (5 stars being the best). 103 wrote comments, mostly very positive, about the content of the movies. We believe all attendees were touched in some way by these films even if, or perhaps more importantly, they were made uncomfortable.

### Grant Impacts and Accomplishments

#### **What did we hope to accomplish?**

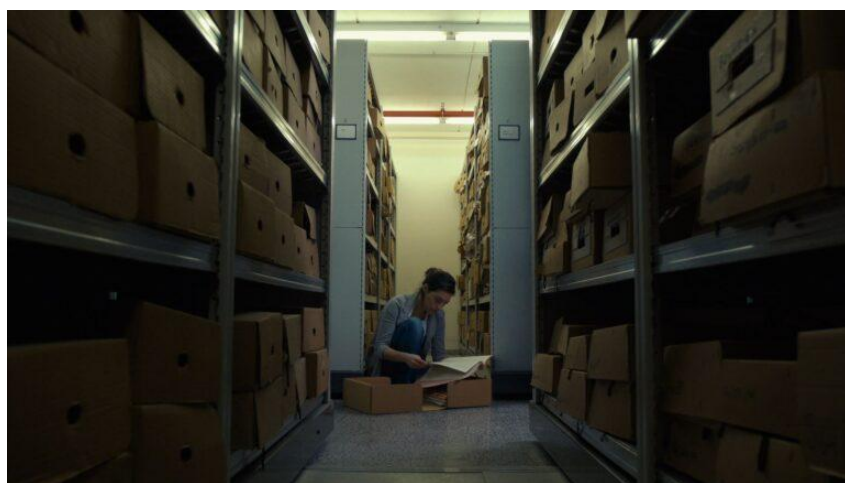
In a word, education—education of ourselves, our churches and the Rochester community. Our sincere hope is that the heart and minds of the movie goers were changed as they viewed/discussed the film, and as they learned more about the facts on the ground in Israel/Palestine. Changed hearts and minds are difficult to measure. What we can say is approximately 400 people viewed and, of those, 103 rated the movies highly. Our hope is that at least some of the movie goers were new so we could spread the word on the plight of Palestinians today.

### **Who was touched?**

Approximately 400 moves goers. In addition to those who attended the film, the organizers of the film festival became a community—an inter-faith community of Muslims, Jews and Christians working for justice in Palestine. We were touched and are proud to be part of that community, and we are grateful that the Presbytery of the Genesee Valley supported us.

### **How did the project energize or transform our churches and the Rochester community?**

Through the promoting and showing of the film, the Penfield and Third congregations have been made more aware of the ongoing situation in Palestine, and prayers of peace for Palestine are said frequently at both churches. Film sponsor “slides” are shown before each film, so Third, Penfield and the Presbytery of the Genesee Valley received publicity to the wider Rochester community. The Third Presbyterian congregation held an educational meeting with their senior pastor who traveled to Palestine last November on the PC(USA) Mosaic of Peace trip. Approximately 25 church members, as well as members of other churches, attended her presentation and learned about both sides of the conflict in the Holy Land. Third’s Israel-Palestine Education and Action team (iPeace) was energized by working on, funding promoting and showing the films in subtle ways. Working for justice and taking concrete steps to “*serve the least of these*” Matthew 25:40 provides meaning and energy to us. Learning and educating people about the ongoing, inhumane crisis that our Palestinian brothers and sister live with has become part of our hearts and souls.



*Blue Box director Michal Weitz researching for film*



### **What did we learn and what obstacles did we experience?**

The movies in October touched on 4 disparate yet equally important topics. From these topics we learned about the forced displacement (transfer) of over 750,000 Palestinians from their homes. We learned about the apartheid system and “matrix of control” of Palestinians in present day Israel/Palestine. We learned about the hopeful persistence of Palestinians. We also learned that anti-BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) legislation and Executive orders are eroding our First Amendment rights here in the United States, including right here in New York State.

The obstacles to Palestinian human rights are immense. Our battle for human rights in the Holy Land will be a long one, not unlike the battle against apartheid in South Africa. The United States government is complicit in this battle and our churches can no longer be silent and still be called a church. We thank the Presbytery of the Genesee Valley for supporting our small effort to combat this apartheid in Israel/Palestine.

## What are our next steps?

The next steps are to continue educating the Rochester area regarding Palestine. This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Israel. Palestinians call this event the Nakba or Catastrophe. Local events to celebrate Israel's founding are already being planned by Rochester area residents, including a concert by the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. There will be much ado about the founding of Israel in our news outlets this year. We also believe that not much, if anything, will be said about the continued difficult living conditions and innocent killings that Palestinians deal with daily. Our group is planning counter events to show the narrative from the Nakba point of view.

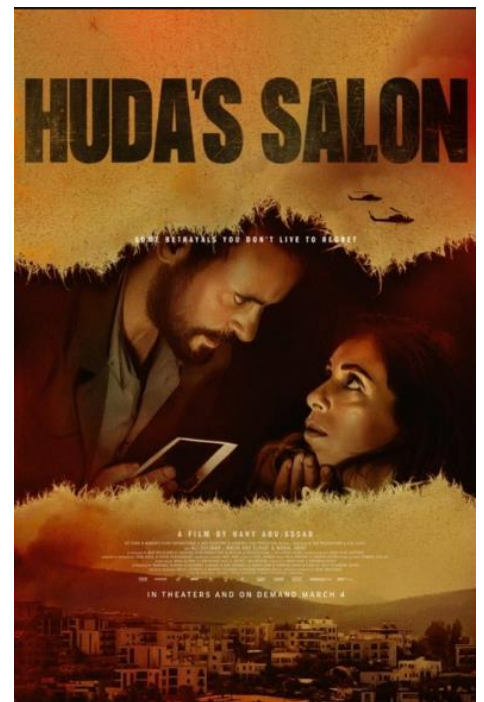
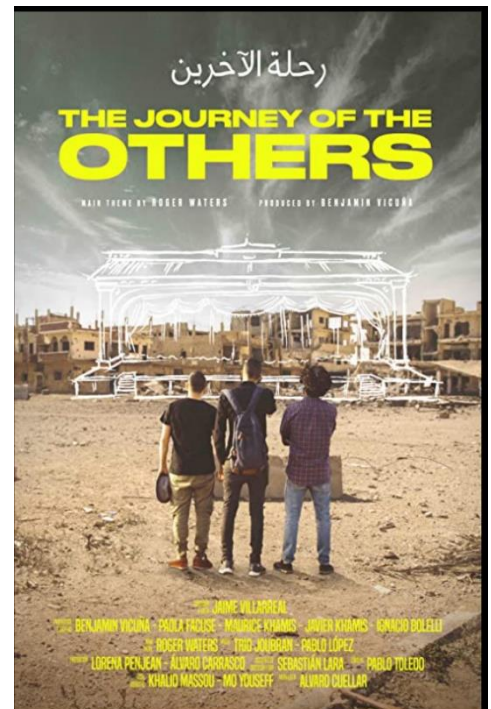
We are also beginning to plan for the 2023 film festival to build on the successful 2022 Witness Palestine Film Festival. Many Penfield, Third and Downtown Presbyterian church members are involved in this planning.

## Where did we see God in our project?

We saw God while watching "Blue Box". The director, Michal Weitz, is the great-granddaughter of Yosef Weitz known as the "Father of the Forests" but he had a darker side. He was also known as the Architect of Transfer. He wrote *"After the Arabs are transferred, the country will be wide open for us...not a single village or a single tribe must be left... there is no other solution."* The Blue Boxes small collection boxes used mainly in the United States at Jewish synagogues to fund the trees needed to reforest over Palestinian towns that had been decimated by the state of Israel as they drove the indigenous people out of their homeland. The courage that the director had in the face of criticism from her own family and country, was palpable. She exposed her great-grandfather, her family and herself to the ills of the founding of Israel. Ills that continue to this day. We saw God in the eyes of people as they left the theatre. Some sad. Some disturbed. All touched by the content of the films.

We also saw God in the organizers of the film festival—the Rochester Witness for Palestine community. We saw God working for those who are suffering and those who are denied their basic human rights. *"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them"* Matthew 18:20. We are proud to be part of that community.

*Submitted by Elder Mindy Shaffer, Penfield Presbyterian Church*



RogerEbert.com rated Huda's Salon 3.5 out of 4 stars.