

FAREWELL BANQUET REMARKS
JULY 2011 (RCA)

Ron Miller was a dedicated Board member of HOP for the last five years and truly a pillar of the organization. He was a passionate believer in the power of dialogue and in the power of this program to open hearts and change minds—to expand consciousness.

His accomplishments were many. Ron served as chair of the Religion Dept. at LFC, and was one of their most popular teachers. He co-founded Common Ground, an interfaith study and dialogue center in Deerfield. He was as beloved at those two institutions as he was at Hands of Peace. He wrote seven books; he taught and lectured throughout the Chicago area and across the nation. His teaching was provocative, brilliant and deep. As one of his students said, “If Ron Miller didn’t get you to start thinking, you must be brain dead.” His sudden passing in May leaves a huge hole both in the organization and in our hearts.

Ron shared his wisdom with us in many ways, but perhaps his most inspired endeavor was the House of Consciousness talk he gave every year to the Hands. He used the metaphor of a house to depict levels of consciousness (or mind states): the basement is where anyone who doesn’t see things my way is an enemy; on the first floor, we become more rational and can see another side to the story—that’s where dialogue becomes possible. On the second floor, we can begin to feel the other side—to experience empathy or compassion. And out on the rooftop—well, that’s where the mystics hang out, that’s where we start to see the unity of all life, that we’re all interconnected as one human family, and we can love our enemy because that category no longer exists.

In honor and memory of Ron Miller, we decided to establish the Rooftop Consciousness Award. This award is to be given to an alum of the program, a past Hand whose life journey demonstrates an exceptional degree of expanded consciousness, a way of thinking and behaving that reaches toward the rooftop. This year, we will be giving the award to two outstanding alumni of Hands of Peace.

At age 14, Rana Haddad, who is an Arab Israeli from Haifa, was one of the youngest participants in our first year's program (2003), and she has stayed active in HOP ever since. Deeply impacted by her experience at HOP, she sought opportunities to speak at her school and to write essays about the importance of peace programs. She hosted interfaith Christmas parties, she attended and encouraged others to attend our first early follow-up meetings, which led to the creation of our XL program—extraordinary leaders who return for a second year in the program. Rana was in our first group of XLs in 2004.

Perhaps the most profound demonstration of how Rona lives the HOP message came in response to the suicide bombing of her cousin's restaurant in Haifa, when more than 20 people were killed, both Arabs and Jews. In the aftermath of this tragedy, she spoke eloquently to the HOP community about how this terrible event had not turned her away from dialogue but had renewed her commitment to it. She defused a lot of anger and served as an example of maturity and compassion.

Rana joined the staff of HOP first as a chaperone and now as our Arab Citizens of Israel Regional Coordinator. She and her family have been enthusiastic hosts of HOP visitors to Haifa, and we will hope to see them this fall during our first HOP sponsored trip to the region.

Now a young woman of 22 and a university student studying Pharmacy, Rana has grown up with Hands of Peace, and we with her. Rana, it is a privilege to offer you the first Rooftop Consciousness Award from Hands of Peace.

Kimberly Marshall was an American participant in HOP the summer of 2005 and returned as an XL in 2006. She was deeply impacted by Ron Miller's talk, and met with him to discuss questions about how she too could become an enlightened and effective educator. She discussed with him the possibility of becoming a rabbi.

Eager to share her experience at Hands of Peace, she delivered a sermon at her synagogue after the program. When the response was not as supportive as she had hoped, she pleaded to give another talk and focused on the biblical history of Ishmael and how important it is to be accepting, inclusive and educated. She was not afraid to stir up controversy or uneasiness, in the service of opening people's minds, of raising consciousness. She continues to be unafraid to speak publicly, passionately and sensitively about her views.

Kimmie is currently a senior at Indiana University, and has chosen to live for four years in the "global village" dorm, which promotes dialogue about world issues among students of diverse backgrounds. Taking a leadership role in the dorm, Kimmie has taught classes, facilitated dialogues, and provided conflict resolution for her peers.

She has studied both Hebrew and Arabic, the Bible and the Quran, and she spent the past year in Israel, where she was able to connect with some of her HOP friends. Her interest is now in comparative religion, and she plans to go to graduate school to pursue her desire to educate others and to illuminate the beauty of religious diversity and commonality. I know that Ron Miller would be delighted with this outcome. Kimmie, it is a privilege to offer you the Rooftop Consciousness Award from Hands of Peace.

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