

## SPOTLIGHT ON THE ARTS

# Festival to revive spirit of understanding

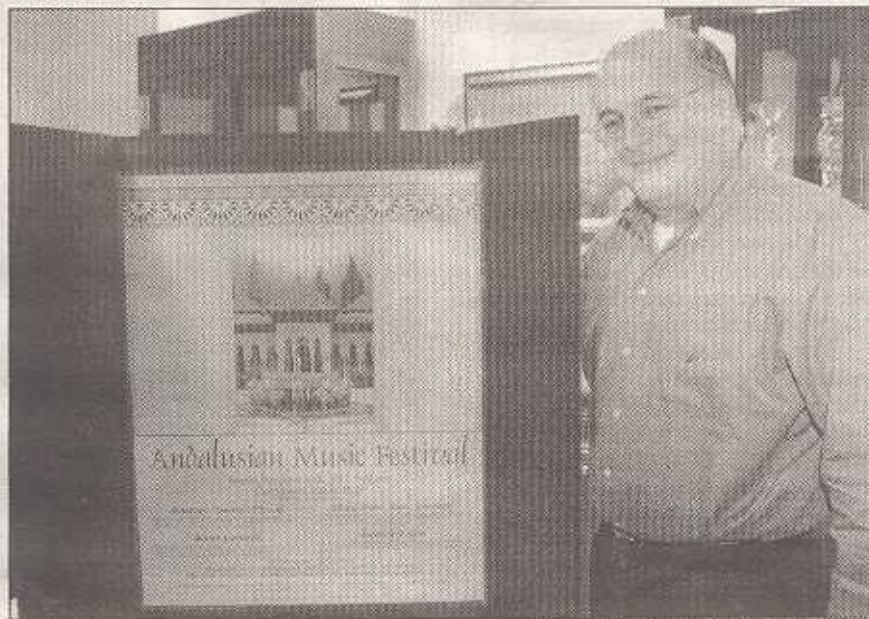
By Iris Hiskey Arno

Long ago — around the year 1000 — in southern Spain, for several hundred years Christians, Jews, and Muslims co-existed in an atmosphere that allowed art, music, poetry, architecture, philosophy, science, and theology to flourish. For Salem Mikdadi, a Palestinian-American engineer living in Dobbs Ferry, the spirit of this unique time and place resonates with his belief in the power of art and culture to foster peaceful, productive dialogue between people of different faiths.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in his most recent and ambitious undertaking, “The Spirit of Andalusia” festival, which begins this Tuesday, Nov. 1, with an art show and culminates 12 days later with a Sunday concert at the Tarrytown Music Hall. In between, lectures, poetry readings, storytelling, and an art workshop promise to fulfill the festival’s billing: “A Joyous Celebration of Diversity and Cultural Understanding.”

Mikdadi, 53, was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents and grew up in Jerusalem and Lebanon. He went to college and graduate school in the United States, spent seven years working in Greece, Qatar, and Kuwait, and settled in Dobbs Ferry in 2000. About six months after 9/11, at the invitation of the Rev. Charles Colwell of St. Barnabas Church in Irvington, Mikdadi became a board member of the newly formed Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Understanding (CJCMU).

A number of years later, when Mikdadi read Maria Rosa Menocal’s book



MIKE DISCIULLO/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

## Salem Mikdadi

“Ornament of the World,” he discovered an inspiring model for today’s pluralism in the harmony of the three Abrahamic faiths in medieval Spain. His excitement was contagious, and the president of the Rotary Club of the Tarrytowns invited him to address the organization. At that talk, Mikdadi met Joyce Stanton, a Jewish book editor from Tarrytown who volunteered to join him in his efforts to promote tolerance and understanding. The two worked well together and Stanton soon joined the CJCMU board. It is this group, with the help of numerous local

sponsors, which is mounting the festival.

### Music to charm the ear

The crowning jewel of the two-week long celebration is the Andalusian Music Festival, which will feature four sets of performers in an intriguing mix of repertoire.

The Boston-based Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble — a group of six young Arab-American musicians from Cairo, Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus, Istanbul, and Mar-

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# Andalusia

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rakesh — performs on authentic instruments including the qanun, a plucked zither; the oud, a fretless lute; the nay, a bamboo flute; the keman, an oriental violin, and the riqq, a fish-skin tambourine. The ebullient percussion, musical improvisation, and use of a microtonal modality all contribute to the group's evocative and joyful sound.

The Boston Camerata, in existence since 1954, is a renowned ensemble specializing in music of the medieval, renaissance and early baroque periods. Two of its soloists — lutenist and longtime musical director Joel Cohen, and Anne Azema, a widely acclaimed French soprano and star of the early music scene — will explore the musical connections between the various traditions.

Flamenco guitarist Jonathan "Juanito" Pascual, deemed by National Public Radio "one of the hottest flamenco guitarists to emerge in recent years," will thrill the audience with his virtuosic guitar playing. Appearing with him will be a flamenco dancer, a singer, and a percussionist.

The duo of Judith R. Cohen and her 19-year-old daughter Tamar Cohen Adams will sing Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) Sephardic songs and accompany themselves on bowed vielle, oud, dulcimer, and traditional percussion instruments.

## Arts and letters

Leading up to the concert are a plethora of events — all local and all free. Besides an opportunity to see the glorious Chagall and Matisse stained-glass windows at the Union Church of Pocantico Hills, a visit there on Saturday, Nov. 5, will offer talks by two scholars under the theme of "Andalu-

sia and the Power of the Pen" (3 p.m.). Yale professor Maria Menocal, the author of the book that fascinated Mikdadi, will discuss medieval literature and culture, and Ross Brann, a Cornell University professor and author of several books on Jews and Muslims in medieval Spain, will discuss Andalusian love poetry. A special treat will be the Middle Eastern food provided courtesy of the American Muslim Women's Association (Mikdadi's wife, Zeena, is its president).

Four poets and storytellers, in a program Mikdadi said is intended "to break stereotypes and confuse people about what makes up identity," will be featured on Sunday, Nov. 6, at 4:30 p.m. at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center in Sleepy Hollow. Participants include the Syrian Jewish storyteller and essayist for The New York Times, Herb Hadad; the Iranian poet Sholeh Wolpe; Matthew Sheno-da, an Egyptian Coptic (Christian) poet, and Mansour Ajami, a Lebanese poet and oud player who will recite his poems in English and Arabic, accompanying himself on the stringed instrument.

Also on Nov. 6, at 1 p.m., is a reception for an art exhibit on display at the Rockefeller State Park Preserve in Pocantico Hills (Nov. 1-13). "Israeli and Palestinian: Artists' Impressions" features the work of two women — a quilt artist, Tamar Drucker, born and raised in Israel, now living in Westchester, and Renate Ghannam, whose paintings feature Palestinian women in traditional garb.

"In the spirit of Andalusia, we wanted to promote a dialogue and understanding between people in conflict," says Mikdadi. "We all hear so much about the Israeli-Arab conflict. We'll provide an antidote."

With more than 20 years of experience teaching about the Middle East and Islam, the founder and director of

AWAIR (Arab World and Islamic Resources), Audrey Shabbas, is more than ready to explain the larger context in a talk about the history, geography, and people of the Middle East. An educator who has received awards for her contributions to Arab-American understanding, she will speak at the Warner Library in Tarrytown on Monday, Nov. 7, at 7:30 p.m. In addition, on Saturday, Nov. 12, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., she will be holding a hands-on art workshop at Sleepy Hollow High School (reservations required). Participants will explore the geometric shapes of Islamic art and create an original stenciled wall hanging.

## Trust despite differences

Mikdadi, Colwell, and Stanton are all excited about the festival. "There's hope for better understanding when we get to know people of other cultures," says Stanton. "I hope people's eyes and minds and hearts will be opened up and they will come away from the festival with a sense of joy over what these cultures have produced." Colwell, reflecting on the experience he has had with the CJCMU board over the past several years, says, "The turning point for us was when we began to trust each other enough to be honest about our differences as well as our similarities and were able to love each other for both. I would like to hold that up as something that can really happen here in Westchester and in our society."

*Tickets to the Andalusian Music Festival are available at [www.tarrytownmusicall.org](http://www.tarrytownmusicall.org) or through TicketForce at (877) 840-0457 or at L'il Rascal, next door to The Music Hall, Wednesday-Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.; \$25 orchestra, \$20 balcony, \$12 student discount balcony seats; further information on all aspects of the festival is available at <http://www.cjcmu.org>.*