

# AGING TODAY

Vol. XXVI, No. 5

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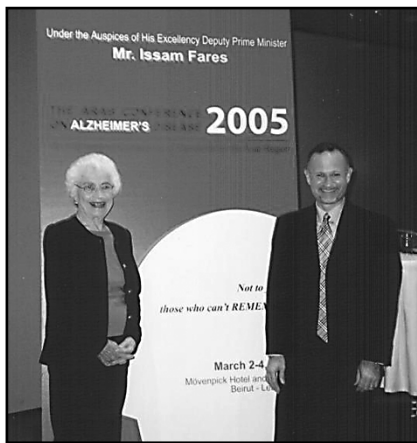
September–October 2005

ISSN: 1043-1284

[www.agingtoday.org](http://www.agingtoday.org)

## U.S. EXPERTS KEYNOTE FIRST ARAB CONFERENCE ON ALZHEIMER'S

*David Troxel and Virginia Bell, coauthors of *The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care* (Baltimore: Health Professions Press, 1997) and subsequent books based on their best-friends approach, traveled last spring to Beirut, Lebanon, where they delivered the keynote address at the first Arab Conference on Alzheimer's disease. In the following letter, Troxel, a writer and long-term care consultant based in Sacramento, shares their experience with readers of **Agging Today**. The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care will soon be published in Arabic.*



Virginia Bell and David Troxel flank conference poster at the first *Arab Conference on Alzheimer's Disease*, where they delivered a keynote address.

It was not your typical conference on aging. Imagine attending a professional meeting where the first day featured a general strike, where the second day coincided with the fall of the government, where large, peaceful but tense demonstrations took place on the street daily, and where uncertainty almost canceled the conference altogether.

This was the experience I had with my longtime colleague and coauthor Virginia Bell, program consultant for the Greater Kentucky and Southern Indiana Alzheimer's Association, during our week in Beirut, Lebanon, in March 2005. We were there to deliver the keynote address at a conference organized by the Alzheimer's Association Lebanon. The first-ever such meeting was an ambitious effort to raise awareness of dementia throughout the region. The audience included Arab physicians, nurses, social workers and other service professionals, as well as family members of those with dementia. Representatives from five Arab countries attended, including Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan and Tunisia. Other countries were expected to come but canceled due to political tensions in the region.

Also present were representatives of the World Health Organization, Alzheimer's Disease International and the Lebanese government.

According to Diana Mansour, president of the Alzheimer's Association Lebanon, 1.5 million people are affected with dementia in Arab countries, about 30,000 of them in Lebanon. Mansour is beautiful and charismatic, a hard person to say no to, even in the face of national turmoil. Caring for her mother with Alzheimer's disease at home is a motivating force in her drive to raise awareness. To date, there have been few services and modest public awareness of dementia in this part of the world. Mansour is trying to change this situation in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world by promoting education and support groups.

### TURMOIL IN THE STREETS

More than 200 people attended the conference despite the political uncertainty surrounding the event. Only weeks earlier, the beloved former prime minister of Lebanon, Rafik Hariri, had been killed in a

dramatic bombing that plunged the country into a state of unrest. As a result of this action, groups that had long opposed one another rallied to urge Syria to leave the country. Syria was widely believed of having a hand in Hariri's death, because he opposed its longtime occupation of Lebanon. Other groups were suspected, such as Christian or Muslim extremists, though, and the United Nations is investigating the assassination.

It was very moving to see Christians and Muslims, along with groups that had previously opposed one another, attend Hariri's memorial and march together in the street. Indeed, a popular sign showed religious symbols of the cross and crescent together under the slogan "Together, Free Lebanon."

Despite promising our families and friends that we would stay away from the demonstrations, we felt compelled to join the crowds and be part of the day. These events were filled with excitement and hope, with enthused young people demanding that the pro-Syrian government resign. We were there in a week of great optimism for change, but the following week over a half-million pro-Syrian Hezbollah members demonstrated. Lebanon and the beautiful city of Beirut now face uncertain times.

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#### FINDING ANSWERS

The conference on dementia featured a mixture of scientific and practice papers, as well as a diverse group of professionals and family members. Sitting near a wealthy Saudi princess were three daughters from a poor village in Tripoli who had traveled with their mother, who has dementia, to find answers.

Despite the tension outside the room, inside we were united in a common cause to raise awareness and to help people and caregivers cope with Alzheimer's and related diseases. The conference organizers displayed courage and tenacity in bringing a ray of hope to families and professionals concerned about dementia in the Arab world. For us, it was very meaningful to speak to the group, and our message and presence were both warmly received. We felt "safe, secure and valued," a phrase we often use in our talks to describe how people with dementia want to feel.