

Midwest photographer makes mark in Mideast



Above: Adi Zarhi, as featured in *The Healers* exhibit. (Photo credit: Tom Casalini.) Right: Photographer Tom Casalini. (Photo credit: Chris Buchner.)

By HILLEL KUTTNER

ORDERLIES exiting the surgery department wheel bedridden patients along a sunny corridor toward other wards. A doctor in green scrubs rushes past them the other way. A young *Haredi* man, dressed in all-black but for a white shirt, walks leisurely several paces behind. From multicolored, cushioned chairs, a family speaking in Arabic observes the foot traffic while awaiting an update on a loved one's condition.

Also watching are the faces of 13 physicians, nurses, technicians, a physical therapist, a midwife, and a medical clown, subjects of portraits hanging on the corridor's lengthy wall. The caregivers include Israelis who are Jewish, Muslim, and Christian, and immigrants from Algeria, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, France, and the United States, their diversity reflecting the rainbow of patients they treat here at the Galilee Medical Center in the northern-Israel coastal town of Nahariya.

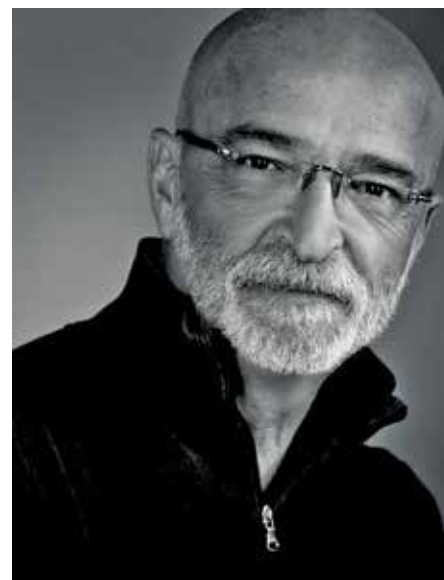
The black-and-white portraits were tak-

en by Tom Casalini, a photographer based in the Indianapolis-area village with the sweetly appropriate name of Zionsville.

Israel is where Casalini visited two years ago to interview his subjects and photograph them. The exhibition, *The Healers*, grew out of the Partnership Together Artist Workshops Program, a joint venture between the Jerusalem-based Jewish Agency for Israel and a consortium of 14 Jewish Federations located primarily in the Midwest of the United States—including Chicago.

The photographs spring, too, from Casalini's belief in art's healing powers. For St. Vincent Indianapolis Hospital, he produced an exhibition in 2015 that pairs his photographs of 17 cancer patients there with, upon the aiming of a viewer's phone app, the patients' voices telling their stories.

He was recruited for both projects by Joani Rothenberg, an art therapist at the Indianapolis hospital who in 2010 had created a painting for the Nahariya facility that hangs just 50 feet from where Casalini's work now appears. Shortly after being



introduced by the owner of an Indianapolis framing shop the two patronized—"There is no such thing as a coincidence," Casalini says—he told Rothenberg that he'd always wanted to visit Israel. She referred him to the Partnership Together program.

In Nahariya, Casalini spent a week meeting caregivers representing multiple professions, ages, religions, and ethnicities.

"As a Christian, I found it overwhelming how everyone works together," Casa-

lini said in a telephone interview.

"What's so exciting and meaningful is to see a community respect each other for their differences," Rothenberg said of *The Healers*. "No one's the same on the inside, but there's this ability to work together, whereas people around the world think that there's so much strife in Israel."

The exhibition, alas, misses an opportunity to drive that point home by the text's neglecting to state each caregiver's religious and ethnic identification.

Two images are displayed for each person—on the job and off—offering patients and other passersby a glimpse at, as Casalini puts it, "the ordinary person" behind the caregiver. Adi Zarhi, the director of physiotherapy services and a Jew, is seen in her white lab coat, an identification badge clipped to her lapel, lips pursed; in the adjacent image, she's decked in cycling apparel astride her racing bike, smiling slightly. Emil Aga, an epidemiologist and a Muslim, wears a striped polo shirt in both images, but in one it's mostly obscured by his white lab coat.

"I am confident that there are people who appreciate my work; if not here on earth, then definitely in heaven," Aga states poignantly in the accompanying text, going on to say that he enjoys coaching soccer, fishing, and visiting the beach.

Casalini said that he sought to project the humanity of the subjects of his two healthcare-centric exhibitions and thereby ease patients' stress.

"The fulfillment for me is to understand what I've put together, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to inspire people's lives. Fear gets in the way of your healing. Less stress gives the body an opportunity to respond. If you can change the idea of hope in one person, it's a success," he said.

American artists participating in the partnership program are expected to share their knowledge, and their work, with the Israelis. One painter produced murals in Akko, a city just south of Nahariya. An artist created a wall mosaic.

"That's the beauty: It's not a visit that came and went, but, rather, the artists left something to the community," said Judy Yuda, the partnership's director. "[Casalini] came to the Western Galilee and gave the community a big gift: this exhibition." ■

Hillel Kuttler is an award-winning editor/writer for companies, non-profit organizations, and many of America's leading publications. His feature articles on history's role in contemporary people's lives have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.