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Sofield leads on

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When Deb Sofield was selected by the American Council of Young Political Leaders to escort a delegation of six other young political leaders on a 13-day tour of Israel and the West Bank, she knew it was a task she was uniquely suited for.

"I'm American, heart and soul," she said. "But I'm Arab by descent. And quite frankly, it is difficult to find people of Middle Eastern descent in politics in the United States."

But from the council's perspective, there was more to it than the fact Sofield was born in Beirut, Lebanon, and adopted by American citizens. At the time, her father worked for the U.S. Department of State.

The council needed someone interested in and knowledgeable about issues facing the Middle East. But they needed someone engaging too, someone comfortable whether in a room of strangers or friends. Someone who would be willing to listen without taking sides.

That is the kind of leader they are trying to create.

The organization's goal is to forge relationships between tomorrow's leaders in the United States and their counterparts around the world. The bipartisan, non-profit group's education program for selected young leaders

between 25 and 40 involves international exchanges, foreign policy and democracy conferences and election study programs.

"The individuals chosen for the program are young people who are expected to move up in politics, or at least become a force to be reckoned with," Sofield said.

Each year the council sends small groups of participants on political study tours to broaden their horizons and organizes reciprocal visits to the United States. Participants learn diplomatic skills, engage in dialogue on bilateral issues and begin building professional relationships through the unique access they receive to the leaders of the nations they visit.

In 2003, Sofield, a former member of the Greenville City Council, traveled as a delegate to Vietnam. The following year, an entourage from Vietnam visited Greenville. Two years later, in 2006, Sofield participated in the East Asia & Pacific Alumni Summit in Tokyo.

But this time, Sofield, who now serves as the first woman on the Commission of Public Works for the Greenville Water System, is an alumnus who will act as a guide.

"My job is to serve as host," she said from Washington, D.C., where she was involved in two days of briefings before



Sofield

boarding a plane last Friday night for Tel Aviv. "My job is to make sure we get where we're going on time and make sure the trip is smooth."

Participants traveling with Sofield are Hawaii state Rep. K. Mark Takai; Anne Im, the policy director for Asian Americans for Community Involvement in San

Jose; U.S. Department of Justice lawyer Eric Beane; Iowa state Rep. Elesha Gayman; Utah state Rep. Eric Hutchings; and Cass Burton an attorney in the policy development section of the Legal Services Division of the Texas Department of Justice.

Before departing, Sofield said the continued unrest in the region doesn't concern her.

"First of all, no matter where you are, anything can happen," she said. "And second, we will be traveling as an American delegation of young officials. Our job is to listen. We don't make decisions. Our purpose is to become informed so that we can speak intelligently about what we saw, not what we saw on television."

While on the trip, Sofield and the other delegates are expected to visit historic sites such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Sea of Galilee and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

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