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Albert Mokhiber’s War Against Hate

During the Persian Gulf war, anti-Arab sentiment in the United States reached disturbing proportions. From ethnic slurs and spray-painted graffiti to outright violence against Arab-Americans, the new patriotism sometimes showed its ugly side.

It was a busy time for Albert P. Mokhiber, Class of 1983. As president of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), Mokhiber has been besieged by reports of such prejudice — and charged with the task of deflecting them.

Mokhiber, 32, took office in September — a month after Saddam Hussein’s tanks rolled into Kuwait and precipitated the worst Mideast crisis in decades.

“There’s always the danger that Arab-Americans will become domestic casualties,” Mokhiber said. Even after the war’s end, the stereotypes persist: “People point at us and say, ‘They’re all terrorists, they’re all oil barons, they all have 40 wives,’ and nobody really cares.”

The ADC is the nation’s largest Arab civil rights group, with 25,000 members and a 22-person staff.

Its efforts range from public relations to legal advocacy. Mokhiber led the ADC to the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of St. Francis College v. Al-Khazraji — and was cheered by the court’s unanimous decision that Arabs were entitled to protection under U.S. civil rights
“Anti-Arab bias is not an indictment against American society,” Mokhiber said in a prominent February profile in People magazine. “There are nuts and crazies in every country.”

Growing up in a melting-pot neighborhood of Niagara Falls, N.Y., Mokhiber experienced little prejudice. His parents were born in the United States, and he and his three older siblings were fully Americanized. At home, Mokhiber’s parents taught the children respect for the heritage of their immigrant Lebanese Christian grandparents. Visits by relatives from Lebanon kept him interested in Arab issues, including that country’s civil war.

After graduating from the State University of New York at Binghamton and UB Law School, he headed the Arab-American desk of Jesse Jackson’s 1984 presidential campaign. Mokhiber and his wife, Hindy, 32, an American-born Palestinian, have two daughters: Laila, 4, and Lina, 3.

Speaking at the Law School in March, Mokhiber praised the school’s progressive approach to human rights. The lessons of UB Law have served him well with the ADC, which has protested, among other abuses, the FBI’s interviewing of hundreds of Arab-Americans to investigate hate crimes and terrorism.

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