

The special relationship Bob Lembke has with Israel

BY LYNN BARTELS

An Arapahoe County native who grew up Catholic has left an imprint on Israel.

Throughout the country, whether dining under the stars in a Bedouin style tent in the desert or touring an indoor playground built to withstand rocket attacks from nearby Gaza, Israeli leaders warmly welcomed an old friend, Bob Lembke, during his recent visits there.

Lembke, a 1973 graduate of Arapahoe High School and the president of United Water and Sanitation District, was part of a delegation of elected, community and government leaders who toured the country in early December.

It was Lembke's 10th trip to



Greenwood Village businessman Bob Lembke, with Fathers Juan Solana and Eamon Kelly, two Catholic priests involved in the Magdala project along the Sea of Galilee in Israel. Lembke has donated to Magdala, billed as the "Crossroads of Jewish and Christian history," after the discovery of a synagogue where Jesus Christ is said to have preached. Lembke presented cutting boards that resemble maps of Colorado to the clergy.

Israel in nine years, and at times he got emotional when he talked about what the country and its

people mean to him.

"The strength and courage of the people in the periphery areas of Israel are inspiring," Lembke said. "They echo the spirit of the West that created our region 150 years ago, and remind me of the homesteading done by my grandparents and mother."

Among the lawmakers on the trip was Sen. Jeff Bridges, a Democrat from Greenwood Village, "As the only legislator with a Masters of Divinity degree, it was par-

ticularly meaningful to spend time with a great group of Coloradans in an area with such deep connections to some of our major world religions," Bridges said.

"The trip itself was a well-balanced presentation of the challenges and opportunities facing the state of Israel today, both internal and external, along with a deep dive into their historical context—in some cases going back thousands of years."

He noted that Israel is about the same size of the Front Range from Fort Collins to Pueblo, with "just as many water-related challenges as we have here in Colorado."

Bridges was surprised to see the city of Greenwood Village mentioned at the heavily fortified indoor playground at Sderot. It appears on a donor wall listing Lembke and his wife, Carol, whose contribution was made in honor of their daughters, Adrienne and Corinne.

The playground was built so that toddlers and teen-agers would have a safe place to play when Hamas launches rockets from Gaza. People in that area have less than 15 seconds from the time the sirens go off to reach a bomb shelter inside the structure.



Sen. Jeff Bridges of Greenwood Village and Bob Lembke, president of United Water and Sanitation District in Greenwood Village, stand in front of a donor wall at an indoor playground in Sderot, Israel. Lembke and his wife Carol helped finance the construction of the playground, which is designed to withstand rocket attacks from Hamas terrorists in nearby Gaza.

Photos by Lynn Bartels



Sen. Jeff Bridges, D-Greenwood Village, and Bob Lembke, president of United Water and Sanitation District in Greenwood Village, taste salicornia, a salty vegetable or herb, depending on how it is used, that is grown in a greenhouse in the Negev desert of Israel.



Efrat Mayor Oded Revivi, whose town is surrounded by three Arab villages on Israel's West Bank, talks about life in his region to a group of Coloradans. Among them, to his left, are Bob Lembke president of United Water and Sanitation District in Greenwood Village, and J.J. Ament, CEO of the Metro Denver Economic Corporation.



Bob Lembke, a Greenwood Village businessman and frequent visitor to Israel, inside an indoor playground near Gaza. Lembke donated money to build the playground, designed to withstand rocket attacks.

Because of that time crunch, a climbing wall for teenagers couldn't be too high because if a warning siren went off they wouldn't have time to unhook a harness and rush to the shelter. That's the same reason there is no merry-go-round.

PTSD among the children in the region is rampant, a guide said. Bed wetting. Nightmares.

"I'm a sucker for kids," Lembke said, when asked why he donated.

The Lembkes also are listed as patrons of the Magdala project on the Sea of Galilee. It was envisioned as a pilgrimage center, and during construction in 2009 authorities discovered a first-century synagogue where Jesus Christ is believed to have preached.

"One of the things that I like about Magdala is that first of all it truly has tried to integrate the Jewish and Christian histories together," Lembke told the group after a tour of the project. "Their tagline 'Crossroads of Jewish and Christian history' is so appropriate."

He paid tribute to two Catholic priests involved in the project, Fathers Juan Solana and Eamon Kelly.

"These are two of my favorite people in Israel," Lembke said.

But Lembke also is a favorite. At the David Citadel Hotel in Jerusalem, a waiter hovered around Lembke, bringing him cappuccinos with fancy designs and glasses and glasses or orange juice. The waiter and Lembke have known each other for several years.

Said Bridges: "It was truly remarkable to see how grateful the folks were for Bob's generosity. He's clearly made a very positive impression, and I could feel that gratitude extend to all of us Coloradans on the trip."

Lynn Bartels worked as a journalist for 35 years, including for the Rocky Mountain News and The Denver Post. She now does communication consulting; one of her clients is United Water.

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