

## **GOLDEN MUG AWARD 2015 SPEECH**

**Delivered by Noah Bopp, SEGL Founder and Director**

**Good afternoon. Before I begin our Golden Mug Award ceremony I want to thank the many people who helped to make today's events possible: the SEGL board, our guest speakers—Ambassador Dan Mozena and Margot Shorey, as well as our afternoon panelists and moderator—Robbie Ross, our Director of graduate affairs, Elysia Hulings, our Director of Development, and each member of the SEGL faculty. And I especially want to thank our chef, Susana and her sous-chef Ray, who created this wonderful lunch.**

**Thank you.**

**This afternoon our graduate community presents its fifth annual Golden Mug award to Ghaith al-Omari. Each year, our graduates vote and present the Golden Mug to the speaker who has had the greatest impact on their lives. The award is named for the coffee mugs that our speakers receive at the end of their SEGL visits. Ghaith (or “Wraith” to those of you more familiar with Arabic than I) has spoken with our students since the Spring of 2010. We have had many extraordinary speakers at SEGL—many of whom are here this weekend—and he is a perfect choice for this year's award.**

**Ghaith speaks with our students when they study the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The conflict is arguably the most intractable of our time, perhaps because its two principle narratives are etched in souls. Even as we sit here this afternoon, the two sides are lobbing rocks and firing bullets in what some are calling the infancy of another Intifada. At SEGL, our goal is not to teach that one side is right, nor is it to exclude opinions that make some students uncomfortable. Our goal is to share a range of responsible views, and allow students, through discussion and reflection, to arrive at their own best conclusions. Ghaith's work (and the work of other guest speakers with American and Israeli perspectives) complements this mission beautifully.**

**What makes Ghaith al-Omari one of the great negotiators of our time? What makes him one of the few people in this town who has taken one of history's great challenges and nudged it forward? What is his secret? I've been thinking about this question ever since he first visited SEGL in 2010.**

**It is not anything superficial. Yes, Ghaith has a clear sartorial sense: most often jeans and a button-down shirt with rolled sleeves, along with his trademark ponytail and goatee. But fashion sense rarely makes history. His secret is not in his first impression.**

**It is not in his presentation style. Yes, he offers remarks like a gently passionate college professor, laying out the conflict so clearly it is difficult to believe no one has solved it yet. But, with apologies to our hosts this morning, college professors rarely make history. His secret is not in his classroom charisma.**

**It is not in his experience, either. Yes, he was a senior advisor to the Palestinian President, he played a key role in the Camp David II summit and Taba talks, and he served as the lead Palestinian drafter of the auspicious Geneva Initiative. But impressive vitas rarely make history. His secret is not in his resume.**

**I'm not sure, but I think after six years of visits to SEGL, I have the answer. I think I know where his secret is. It's inside his backpack. The backpack that invariably accompanies each of his visits.**

**After all, none of our other speakers brings a backpack. They prefer shiny leather briefcases or trendy purses or hip messenger bags. And Ghaith's backpack is so unassuming and inconspicuous I can't even describe it to you—it is as unmemorable as Clark Kent before he steps into a phone booth—and it is perfect for hiding something important in plain sight.**

**Something important, indeed. Ghaith, your secret is out. That backpack, I believe, contains hard-earned wisdom. It contains steel rods for the back-breaking work you do. And it contains meaningful leadership and life lessons for our students.**

**Let me share three of those lessons.**

**First: Most of us think a successful negotiator extracts as much as possible for her side. Ghaith turns this assumption on its head. His lesson for SEGL students? Think not just of the victory speech that your political leader must give. The other side must give a victory speech too. And so you must also think of that victory speech—your adversary’s victory speech. If both sides can convince their populations that they have won, peace has a real chance to prevail. If only your side can credibly claim victory, the heartache will continue. This is not just a lesson for Israelis and Palestinians; it is a lesson for leaders everywhere.**

**Second: Ghaith tells a poignant story about a call he received while driving to another round of negotiations in Israel. The Palestinian man on the other end of the line was about to have his home bulldozed. He was anxious and upset. As Ghaith picked up another cell phone and began to make calls to highly-placed friends, he heard a crash on the other end of the line. The man began weeping and hung up. His home had been destroyed. Ghaith tells the students that he was so angry that he almost turned his car around. He almost refused to join the next round of negotiations. And then he realized, “what good would that do?” Every moment we are not talking, every moment we are not trying to solve this problem, is another moment that someone is dying, someone is losing her home, someone is being treated unfairly. If I truly believe in justice, I must never let discouragement win. And so, I must continue, even in the worst of times. Again: this is not just a lesson for Israelis and Palestinians; it is a lesson for leaders everywhere.**

**Third: Ghaith spends an enormous amount of time visiting college campuses with an Israeli counterpart. Their sessions are often interrupted by student activists lobbing insults at Ghaith and his colleague. (Indeed, a quick online search reveals that Ghaith has been labeled both an “Anti-Israel Propagandist” and a “stooge who is the main liaison to the pro-Israel lobby.” Did you catch that? People on both sides love to insult him.) What is his response to this lack of civility? He asks the students this: “Is it more important for you to be right—to feel good because you have insulted the other side and earned accolades from people who already think like you**

**do—or do you want to solve the problem? If you want to solve the problem, you have to move past emoting. Again, this is not just a lesson for Israelis and Palestinians; it is a lesson for leaders everywhere.**

**Now, I should note this: many of our students disagree with Ghaith's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some think he goes too far, and others think he does not go far enough. That is the beauty of our multi-faceted community. But, as this award testifies, all of them value the lessons he carries in his backpack.**

**Ghaith, it is time to add something to your backpack. Along with the wisdom, the steel rods, and the life lessons, you will now be able to pull out a Golden Mug. We hope it will give you confidence, amongst all the name-calling and sadness, that your work is valued and that you are inspiring others who, like you, will nudge history forward.**

**To speak more about this, I have asked Spring 2015 graduate Matan Arad Neeman to share a few words. Matan is a senior at University Prep School in Seattle Washington, where he is on the mock trial and crew teams, and directs Student Facilitators, a student group that convenes regular all-school conversations about controversial issues. Matan?**