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Peace activist applauds Middle East talks

Thornhill resident says Camp David summit not as much of a failure as headlines suggest

BY MIKE ADLER
 Staff Writer

Erez Anzel knows what it is like to go among Arabs in the uniform of Israel, holding a gun. He has also been beaten to the ground for sug-

gesting Arabs have the same rights as other Israelis. The national co-president of Canadian Friends of Peace Now, Anzel lived in Israel for eight years, and served there as an army paratrooper.

Now a Thornhill resident, he maintains that the Camp David peace summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was not a "failure," as media headlines have called it, but a success.

"I felt they were much closer than they had ever been before," Anzel said this week, adding he's confident some kind of deal can be reached soon.

The civil engineer and software designer said his army service showed him how precarious Israel's position was, and also what it was like "to be an occupier."

"I was the one holding the gun but I was the one who could easily be ambushed," Anzel recalled.

He decided he was morally opposed to some things the army did — "I do not feel Israel should be occupying another people" — and joined Peace Now, a group founded by reserve army officers in 1978.

At a university in Haifa, Anzel was ambushed by far-right Israelis campaigning to deny Arab students the right to study at the school. Anzel was

voicing his own view, which was opposed to theirs. "They attacked me, knocked me down, kicked me unconscious. Almost lost an eye there," he said. After moving to Canada, Anzel restarted his work for Peace Now, which is not a pacifist organization, he said, but believes that Israel can be more secure by making peace with its neighbours.

In Canada, volunteers for the organization — whose website is www.peacenowcanada.org — keep a low profile, Anzel said, educating the Jewish community about the peace process and raising money.

In April, Peace Now hosted an Israeli general's speech at a Thornhill synagogue and plans more events in the region later this year.

The peace process and Camp David talks are certainly on the minds of the local Jewish community, said Moshe Ronen, president of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

York Region is thought to have Canada's third-largest Jewish population, and the City of Vaughan is also twinned with an Israeli town, Ramla.

Ronen predicted the solution that will work in the peace talks will be one that leaves both sides unhappy. A 50-year conflict does not get resolved in a two-week summit, he added.



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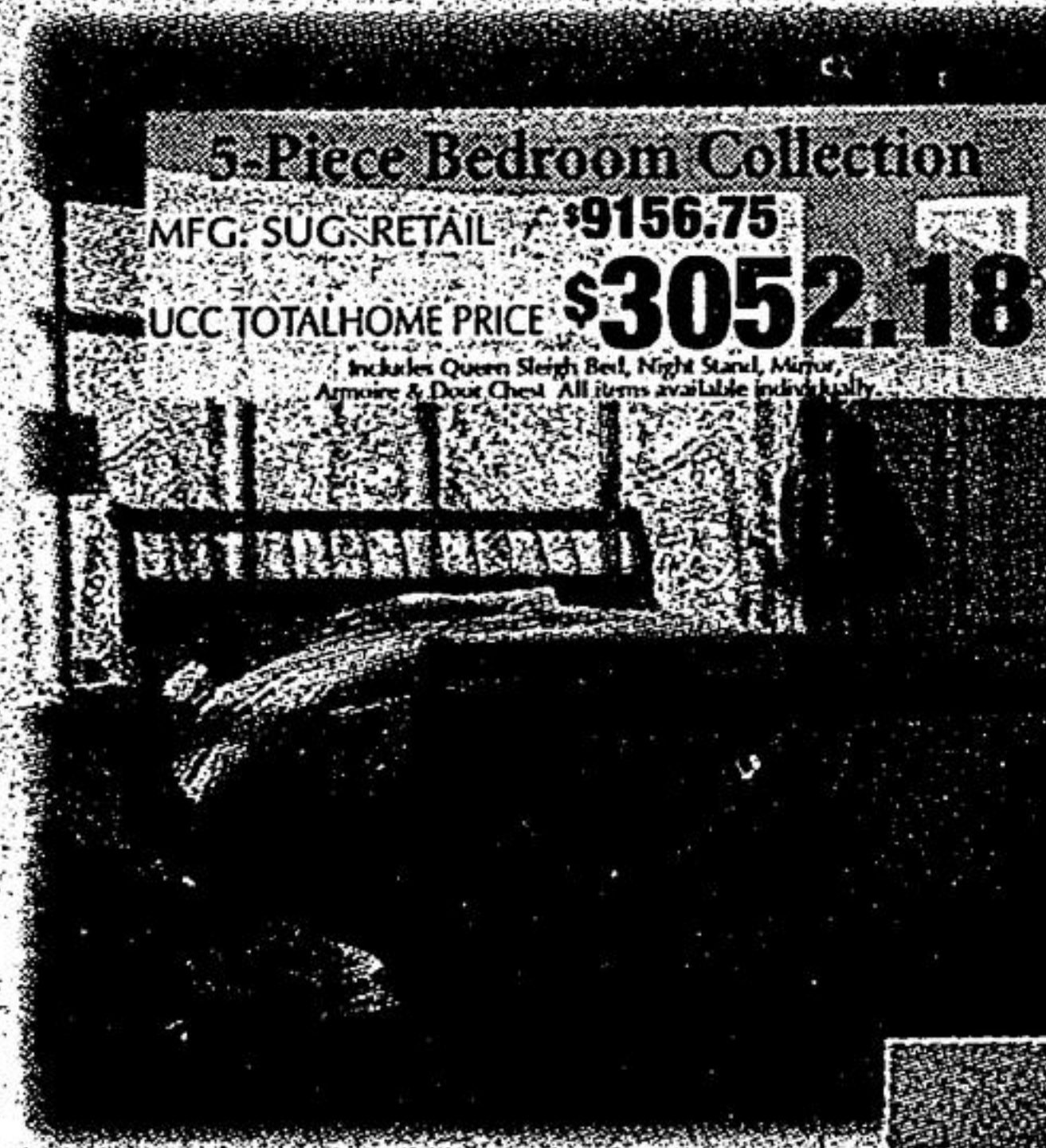
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