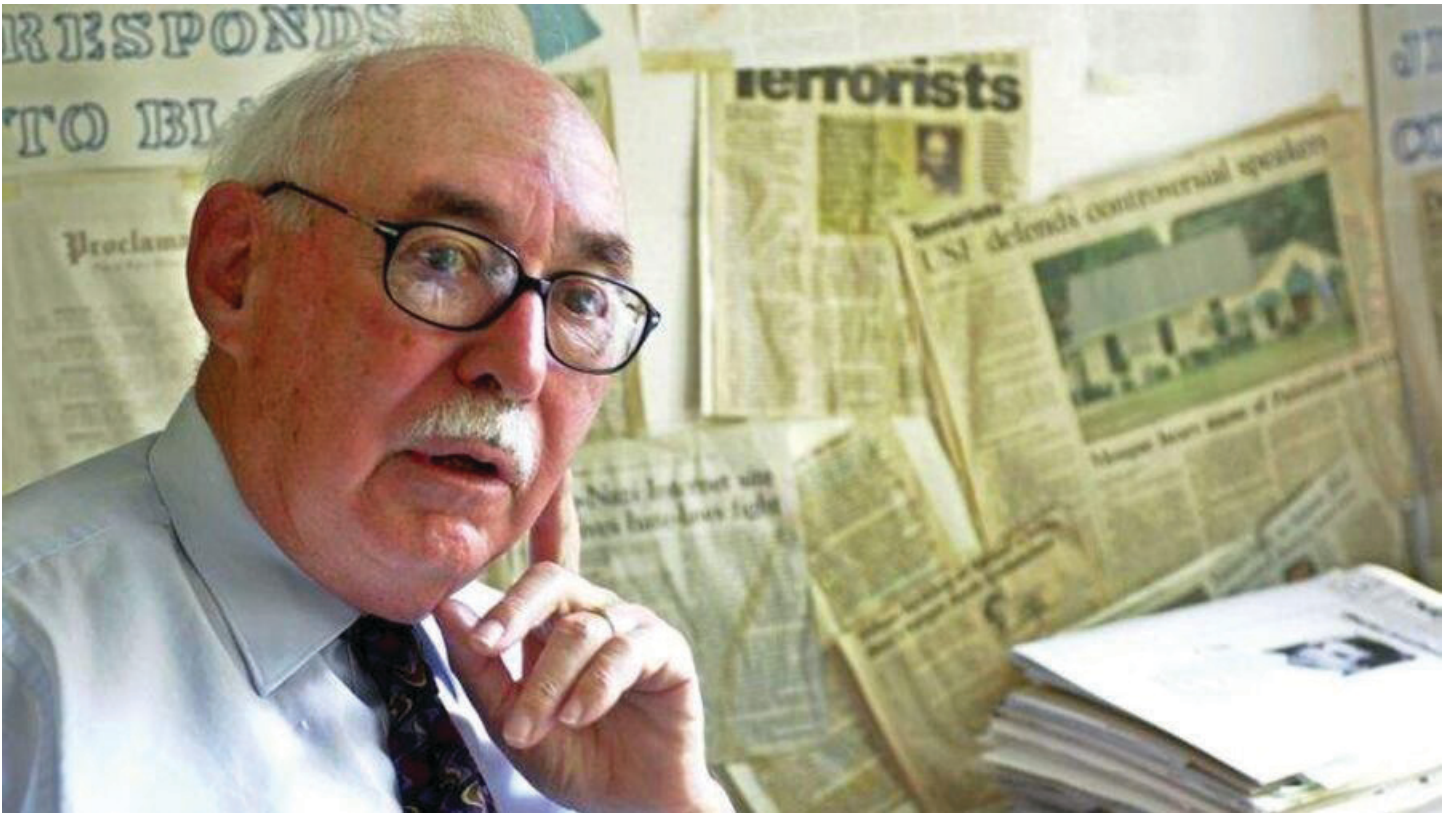


Tampa Bay Times

NEWS

Retired educator Norman Gross advocated for Israel



By Andrew Meacham | Former Times Reporter
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PALM HARBOR — Online Tampa Bay Times files go back to 1987. Newspaper clippings extend another 50 years or so. Those clips in labeled envelopes are mostly news stories, not letters to the editor.

So there is no way of telling how many letters Norman Gross actually wrote to the newspaper. A search under that name, including the middle initial “N” he liked to use, turns up 194 results since Jan. 23, 1987, most of them letters.

Most of the letters took someone to task. Overwhelmingly, objects of his ire fell into one of two categories: groups or individuals he described as hostile to Israel; or the news media, especially the Times writers including senior correspondent Susan Taylor Martin.

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“(Times columnist) Bill Maxwell and I used to write a great deal about the Mideast,” Martin said, “generating no end of scathing letters to the editor from Norm, who was convinced that we, and the Times, had a pro-Palestinian bias.”

Mr. Gross, retired teacher from Rochester, N.Y., with a doctorate in education, died Oct. 10 of congestive heart failure at age 90. He founded the Tampa Bay chapter of PRIMER (Promoting Responsibility in Middle East Reporting) in 1992. Mr. Gross was one of the earliest and most vocal critics of Sami Al-Arian, who had founded a Palestinian support organization suspected of funneling money to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

He first wrote to the Times about Al-Arian in 1995. He circulated a petition to have the tenured computer science professor fired from the University of South Florida, and even took Judy Genshaft aside at her 2001 inauguration as USF’s president to urge her to look into Al-Arian’s activities.

He debated Al-Arian on the radio and contacted producers for Bill O’Reilly, Mr. Gross’ family said. The resulting interview on The O’Reilly Factor led to Al-Arian’s suspension from USF. In 2003, federal authorities charged Al-Arian with racketeering for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. He is now on house arrest in Virginia in a kind of legal limbo.

PRIMER’s larger agenda concerned media portrayals of Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. During a wave of violence in 2002, Mr. Gross noted that Palestinian suffering had been “exquisitely described” in a column by Martin, but lamented what he called a “one-dimensional” media narrative.

On a whim, Martin decided to meet the man who had been the paper’s most ardent critic. She called Mr. Gross and suggested they get together for lunch.

“To my great surprise, Norm in person turned out to be not the religious firebrand I had imagined,” Martin said, “but a polite, soft-spoken grandfatherly sort who listened as much as he talked. That pleasant lunch didn’t keep Norm from continuing to write, but every now and then he would actually praise a piece, or at least acknowledge there might be more than one point of view.”

Norman Gross was born into a tough Rochester neighborhood in 1923. “He characterized himself in those early years as somewhat of a street fighter,” said Deborah Gitomer, his daughter. He taught high school and later earned a Ph.D. from the University of Rochester.

Long before schools were integrated, Mr. Gross started a voluntary program that allowed inner-city children to attend suburban schools.

He was a family man who enjoyed taking his wife and children camping, or to Israel or Peru. A Palm Harbor resident who lived in the Tampa Bay area since 1982, he had five season tickets for Buccaneers games and was always hoping grandchildren could help fill those seats.

He still pounded out letters to the editor on a typewriter, but in recent years wrote far fewer of them.

“Norm was a good man,” said Rabbi Jacob Luski of Congregation B’Nai Israel. “He was a dedicated Jew, a proud Zionist, and he was willing to make sure that whatever it takes to defend the Jewish people should be done, because history has taught us that we must act.”



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