

MUJU team loses its mojo

ADAM BLAU

AS the annual Unity Cup celebrates cultural diversity through an Aussie Rules tournament this Sunday, the trans-religious MUJU team will be conspicuously absent for the first time in four years, sadly signalling that one of Melbourne's shining examples of interfaith relations between Jews and Muslim has hung up the boots.

Co-hosted by the Australian Federal Police and several AFL teams, the Cup is slated as "Strengthening Communities Through Sport" and features teams from diverse communities in a round-robin competition.

But this year the part Jewish, part Muslim MUJU Club won't be fielding with co-founder Joel Kuperholz saying last year's conflict in Gaza played a part in breaking down relations.

"The relationships went from personal to political," mused former Bialik student Kuperholz, who formed the MUJU Peace Club with Oussama Abou-Zeid from the Newport Islamic Society in 2011.

"In retrospect, I think that the relationships formed were really well intentioned and sustainable during quiet times but during the conflict between Israel and Hamas, everyone was very loyal to their own community allegiance and point of view."

Following its formation, the MUJU Peace Club participated in



The MUJU team celebrates winning the Unity Cup in 2014.

four consecutive Unity Cups, winning the premiership twice.

"MUJU Peace Club provided the opportunity for Jewish and Muslim teenagers from the opposite sides of town to cross cultural and geographical barriers that divide us and allow us to pursue shared interests like footy," said Kuperholz.

"It was a very exciting progression in Muslim and Jewish relations and I counted those guys as friends."

Abou-Zeid told *The AJN* there's no denying the positive impact MUJU has had. "Before the team I had never met a Jewish person so it was good to meet Jewish guys from Melbourne, understand their side of the story and make friendships and connections," he said.

Abou-Zeid says he has some fond MUJU memories, including the Cup triumphs in both 2012 and '14, as well as "seeing Muslims and Jews playing alongside each other."

Kuperholz added that it was the wider cultural impact as outlined in a survey from the Attorney-General's office that really underscored the influence of what he and Abou-Zeid had created.

"MUJU has been part of a transformation of attitudes by the Muslim participants, families and community toward the Jewish community," he said. "The survey found that their attitudes toward the Jewish community had improved by 67 per cent!"