



Truce Grit

An in-demand Houston mediator puts the city on the world map, exporting a rare and priceless commodity—peace

| *By Peter Barnes* |

| *Photography by Phoebe Rourke Ghabriel* |

“Conflict is inevitable,” says Butler, who’s helped resolve violent tensions the Sudan, as well as in gang-dominated sections of Houston’s Alief area. “What’s not inevitable is [our] response to it.”

In a corner of Europe synonymous with genocide and civil war, a young Albanian told Randall Butler how a rival politician had been abducted and tortured. He was upset not only because of the dastardly nature of the episode, but because he felt complicit. “He knew full well,” says Butler, a Houston-based international mediator, “that it was one of his own relatives that had ordered the kidnapping.”

But, thanks in part to Butler’s work, the story has a happy twist—a tilt toward redemption. “So he went back to Albania to find this guy and ask his forgiveness,” says the professional peacemaker. The two men

even wound up friends, and went on to form a group of leaders from previously warring factions working together to find a way forward for their country.

It’s one of many remarkable stories the earnest attorney is telling today, chatting enthusiastically at a Westheimer coffee shop.

He’s explaining his passion for resolving conflicts, whether in a violence-addled apartment conflict nearby in Alief, a yearly peace conference he helps lead in Croatia, or a recent tour of Sudan. Butler, 55, seems to be making a difference in places the U of H law school grad never envisioned when a judge first assigned one of his local legal cases to mediation more than a decade ago.

“I remember saying ‘I don’t believe in mediation. What are they talking about?’” Butler says. But after a mediator resolved the matter in one sitting, the accomplished personal-injury lawyer changed his point of view—and the arc of his life. He recalls his epiphany: “Not only am I astounded that my case settled, but this makes sense. This process really makes sense.”

Butler began studying conflict resolution, attending Harvard workshops and teaching classes at First Presbyterian Church in the Museum District. A church connection led him to the peace conference in Croatia, where he’s been a speaker since 2002. Each year, young adults with leadership potential from around the volatile region gather to work out their differences in discussions guided by Butler and his peers. **CONTINUED ON PAGE 127...**

dinner nightly. 1962 W. Gray St., 713.528.3474, tonymandolas.com \$\$

Trevisio U

Stop in at this chic Med Center resto for happy hour in the bar or on the balcony, Mon.-Fri., 4-7PM. The menu features a tasteful selection of seafood dishes, like the crispy-skin striped bass with sautéed fingerling potatoes. Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner Mon.-Sat. 6550 Bertner St., 713.749.0400, trevisiorrestaurant.com \$\$\$

Truluck's Seafood

The stone crabs here are hard to pass up. But be sure to explore the entire menu—order your choice of seafood grilled rather than breaded and fried. Lunch and dinner daily. 5350 Westheimer Rd., 713.783.7270, trulucks.com \$\$\$

Uptown Sushi

Chef and well-known restaurateur Donald Chang's sleek sushi bar dreams up combos like the Italian roll—tomato, shrimp, sprouts and parmesan—or the Beef Fajita roll—sirloin, onion and pepper in soy paper. Lunch and dinner, Mon.-Sat. 1131-14 Uptown Park Blvd., 713.871.1200, uptown-sushi.com \$\$\$

Valentino N

James Beard award winners, Perio Selvaggio and Luciano Pellegrini, transformed the former Bistro Moderne space inside The Hotel Derek to a deep-red and darkly mod den. Prepare for a parade of colorful plates, as Chef Cunninghame West dishes crudo from the Vin bar, and artfully presented Italian fare, such as bucatini stuffed with mascarpone and prosciutto blanketed in a light tomato sauce. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner in Vin bar daily; Dinner in Valentino daily. 2525 W. Loop South, 713.850.9200, valentinorestaurant.com \$\$\$

Vic & Anthony's

With big steaks, gratuitous service and a bowl-me-over interior, Tilman Fertitta's fine Downtown steakhouse attracts its regular crowd of heavy hitters as well as visiting newcomers. Dine on menu favorites like the succulent lobster bisque and tender-aged steaks. Lunch on Fri., dinner nightly. 1510 Texas Ave., 713.228.1111, vicandanthony.com \$\$\$\$

Vino 100

This wine bar's selection of 100 wines for less than \$25 can tantalize your taste buds without breaking the bank. Enjoy your latest purchase at the bar or lounge area, or get a bottle to go for a quiet night at home. 11693 Westheimer Rd., 281.759.4100, vino100.com \$

Voice U

Touting acclaimed Executive Chef Michael Kramer—and a \$4 million revamp—this Downtown destination is coming in loud and clear. The new menu is stocked with regionally inspired Modern American cuisine, and now features new classic cocktails by artisan libation mixer Bobby Heugel of Anvil. 220 Main St., in Hotel Icon, 713.224.4266, hotelicon.com \$\$\$\$

Willie G's U

This Landry's resto recently underwent a major makeover, featuring a new black and red color scheme and a new menu of seafood delights—adding the likes of spiced ahi tuna with veggie risotto to its regulars of oysters on the half shell and house-made Louisiana-style gumbos and bisques. There's also a cool new al fresco lounge. Lunch and dinner daily. 1605 Post Oak Blvd., 713.840.7190, williegs.com \$\$

Yao Restaurant and Bar

Early menu hits at the new Downtown location of Rocket star Yao Ming's family restaurant include chop suey, honey-glazed sea bass and "Sweet and Yao Chinese burger," which swaps ground beef for a grilled vegetable-seafood patty and lettuce in place of a bun. Lunch and dinner daily. 1201 Main St., 713.739.9267, yaorestaurant.com \$\$

Zaké

Enjoy innovative sushi specials like the Soprano roll (smoked salmon, avocado topped with cheesy crab and baked) or Diablo roll (unagi and shrimp tempura, avocado and red tobiko with spicy mayo rolled in soy paper). Lunch and dinner daily. 2946 S. Shepherd Dr., 713.526.6888, zakesushilounge.com \$\$



Randall Butler founded the Institute for Sustainable Peace in Houston in 2007.

...HOUSTON CONFIDENTIAL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 58 The process starts with one side simply listening to the other and asking questions. A mediator leads the dialogue, encouraging one faction to picture themselves in the other's shoes. It can be a slow process, but time and again Butler has seen it lead to enemies acknowledging injustices and making a commitment not to retaliate.

While he still pays the bills mediating legal cases locally, Butler expanded his non-profit work by forming the Houston-based Institute for Sustainable Peace in 2007. His efforts abroad put him in touch with a growing circle of policy makers, including previous Houston Mayor Bill White who suggested Butler lead early meetings with the city, non-profit groups and residents at an ailing Alief apartment complex called The Mint. Gang violence in the surrounding neighborhood is so pervasive that the fire department won't venture down certain streets without a police escort. But in the last year at The Mint, crime has dropped off, teens once in gangs are getting involved in the apartment leadership and neighbors run an on-site library and after-school program.

"Conflict is inevitable. What's not inevitable is [our] response to it," Butler says. It's a message he continues to promote locally, most recently at an event the Institute for Sustainable Peace co-sponsored with U of H called Peace Jam. Last month it brought upwards of 250 high school students and an Iranian Nobel laureate together to trade notes on community peace-making.

While Butler discusses the far-ranging groups he's seen benefit from conflict resolution, he pauses to glance at his cell phone and notes casually that he'll have to return a call from the ambassador of Sudan. In 2007, a refugee and orphan—often referred to as one of Sudan's "Lost Boys"—approached Butler at a leadership workshop in Berkeley and asked him to help unite organizers within the sizable but bitterly divided Sudanese population in the U.S. After a fruitful impromptu meeting between three refugees from the north of the country and three from the south, a conference in Colorado the following year gathered 22 leaders in the American Sudanese community. The most recent in what have become yearly conferences even attracted politicians from Sudan who invited Butler to bring his skills to their country.

"I never would have picked Sudan. It is maybe one of the most complicated places on Earth. The Sudanese themselves will tell you 'We've been at war with ourselves for over 50 years,'" Butler says. And yet in October, he bid farewell to his CPA wife of 37 years Kathy and journeyed to a Khartoum hotel where he was surprised to find himself surrounded by reporters from every major newspaper and TV station in the country.

"When I got home, the young Sudanese guy who works for us said, 'Randy, you're on Al Jazeera in the United States!'" Butler says.

The week that followed put him in touch with leaders from rival political and ethnic factions across the country. While they all shared a bloody past, Butler says they also shared a desire for peace, which is all he believes that two parties need to start talking.

"All of that diversity is a strength," he says. "And we need to call upon those strengths to build a better future for all of us." ■