

Program lets Palestinian, Israeli teens look past differences

By Brian Cox, Chicago Tribune on 07.24.14

Word Count **633**



Israeli and Palestinian teens in the 2013 Hands of Peace program run by Glenview Community Church pose for a picture in the form of a peace sign. Photo: Ashley Bates/Hands of Peace

CHICAGO — The conflict between the Israeli military and its Palestinian counterparts in the Middle East is foremost on the mind of Palestinian teenager Taher, who recently arrived on Chicago's North Shore to take part in a program that seeks to help build peace and understanding between the longtime enemies.

"It makes me feel not strong or not free," he said of the conflict and living in the West Bank. "But here I can see Israeli kids and talk to them and send them my message. I can tell them what I can't tell them back in the West Bank."

Taher, 15, is one of more than 20 teens who arrived recently for an 18-day program called Hands of Peace. It seeks to build bridges of communication by bringing Israeli and Palestinian teenagers together in informal settings where they can talk freely about their experiences back home and forge friendships, said Hands of Peace Executive Director Julie Kanak.

"It's really impossible for them to meet in this format back in their home territory," Kanak said. "There's a separation wall, so there's certainly physical and geographic barriers, but there are national barriers as well."

The Tribune is not using the last names of the teens because Kanak said they could face backlash at home for their participation in the program.

Hands of Peace, founded by Glenview Community Church, in suburban Chicago, has been in place for 11 years, and more than 400 teenagers from the Middle East have taken part. While the simmering conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is often a backdrop during the program, this is one of the first times the program has taken place when the two sides are actually fighting, said Roy Gordon, a facilitator in the program.

“We were all really concerned,” Gordon said. “We were wondering if there was going to be any problems with the young people being able to get out here, but everything has gone well so far.”

Each morning the teens meet for two hours and are encouraged to talk freely about their feelings, experiences, prejudices, hopes and dreams.

“Most of these young people have never had a conversation with someone on the other side because their lives are so segregated there,” Gordon said. “This is their first opportunity to do that. Pretty quickly they learn that they’re all just teenagers and they have a lot more in common than they have separately.”

Earlier the group had a barbecue at Elder Park in suburban Winnetka followed by a game of softball, a sport many of them had never played before.

But that was not the only “first” for Taher. He said he never met an Israeli until arriving on the North Shore. He also said he hopes he has a chance to talk to his peers about the conflict.

“I want to make change, and I want to have a voice to show to people what Palestine is and what we truly do, who are Palestinians and what we suffer,” he said.

The trip also marks the first time that 15-year-old Shachar, who is Jewish and lives in Jerusalem, has met a Palestinian.

“A success for me would be to get to know the Palestinians better and what do they really want, and how they feel about the situation that’s going on in Israel,” he said. “It’s so weird because we’re here trying to get to know each other, and back home there’s missiles. It’s crazy.”

Gordon dismissed with a wave of his hand anyone who might express cynicism about the program.

“The other option is to do nothing, and to me that’s not an acceptable option,” he said. “Something has to be done, and this is what we chose to do. We’re giving them an opportunity to learn something about the other side.”

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following BEST explains the purpose behind the program Hands of Peace?
 - (A) to discuss the cause of the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians
 - (B) to help build healthy relationships between teenagers from the Middle East
 - (C) to help teenagers from Israel and the occupied territories escape hostile conditions
 - (D) to help teenagers get a glimpse of life on the North Shore

- 2 According to the article, which of the following sentences is NOT TRUE?
 - (A) Hands of Peace is an 18-day program run by Glenview Community Church.
 - (B) Teenagers participating in the program are hopeful of making a change.
 - (C) The program has been operating in the Middle East for the past 11 years.
 - (D) It gives teenagers from the Middle East a chance to interact with each other freely.

- 3 Which of the following BEST supports the central idea of the text?

- 4 Which of the following is a first-time thing for the program Hands of Peace?
 - (A) the teenagers had a game of softball
 - (B) more than 400 teenagers participated in the program
 - (C) it's been organized with the support of the Palestinian military
 - (D) it's taking place when Israelis and Palestinians are actually fighting each other

Answer Key

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