

Israeli and Palestinian teens share similarities across their divide

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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 — Taher, a Palestinian teenager from the West Bank, had never met an Israeli before.

Shachar, an Israeli teen from Jerusalem, had never spoken to a Palestinian, although they are his neighbors.

The two 15-year-olds are among more than 20 teens who arrived in Chicago recently. They are participating in a program that seeks to build peace and understanding between the longtime enemies. Called Hands of Peace, the program brings Israeli and Palestinian teens to the U.S. where they can talk freely about their experiences and build friendships, said Julie Kanak. She directs Hands of Peace.

“It makes me feel not strong or not free,” said Taher of the conflict between Palestinians and Israel. “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.”

Only the first names of the teens are being used. Kanak said they could face problems at home for taking part in the program.

Meeting Across Barriers

“It’s really impossible for them to meet ... back in their home territory,” Kanak said. She spoke of the separation wall that stands between Israel and the Palestinian territories. She spoke of other barriers too. The two peoples live in different cities, go to different schools and have almost no chance to ever meet.

The Palestinians are seeking their own country. They and the Israelis have been negotiating — and fighting — over the land for decades. Neither side trusts the other. Most recently, Israel and the Hamas group that governs Gaza have been in a fierce fight.

The Hands of Peace program was started by the Glenview Community Church in suburban Chicago 11 years ago. To date, more than 400 teenagers from the Middle East have participated in it. The conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is always in the background. But this is one of the first times the program has taken place when the two sides are actually fighting, said Roy Gordon, who works for 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. They 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,” 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.”

"Firsts" For Two Teens

Earlier the group had a barbecue at Elder Park in suburban Winnetka. The barbecue was 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 hopes he has a chance to talk to the Israeli teens about his experience as a Palestinian.

“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 likewise marked the first time that Shachar 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 doubt the program does any good.

“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 Select the sentence that BEST shows the reason for starting the Hands of Peace program.
- (A) Shachar, an Israeli teen from Jerusalem, had never spoken to a Palestinian, although they are his neighbors.
 - (B) The conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is always in the background.
 - (C) Earlier the group had a barbecue at Elder Park in suburban Winnetka. The barbecue was followed by a game of softball, a sport many of them had never played before.
 - (D) "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."
- 2 According to the article, which of the following sentences is TRUE?
- (A) The program was started less than a decade ago.
 - (B) The U.S. government provides funds for the program.
 - (C) The Hands of Peace program operates out of Chicago.
 - (D) Israel does not want to reach an agreement over the Gaza Strip.
- 3 Select the sentence that is MOST important to include in a summary of the article.
- (A) They are participating in a program that seeks to build peace and understanding between the longtime enemies.
 - (B) "It's really impossible for them to meet ... back in their home territory," Kanak said.
 - (C) "Most of these young people have never had a conversation with someone on the other side," Gordon said.
 - (D) Gordon dismissed with a wave of his hand anyone who might doubt the program does any good.
- 4 Select the sentence that states the reason for conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Answer Key

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