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Students learning to live together in a divisive world

Thu, 07/18/2019 - 12:42pm Mike Eldred



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Jerusalem Peacebuilders Leadership Institute participants, from left, George Abu Dauod, Noam Williams, and Yafa Nassar with residential assistant Amran Shimaly. Lauren Harkawik

Peacebuilders Institute uses religion as tool for reconciliation, discussion coming to local church

WEST BRATTLEBORO - Driving past the unmarked entrance to Acer Farm, one would have no idea that down its long driveway, one of the world's largest conflicts is being studied by the very people it affects the most.

Since 2011, for two weeks in the summer, around 20 Israeli, Palestinian, and American students come to Acer Farm to attend the Jerusalem Peacebuilders Leadership Institute, a program dedicated to creating peace by bringing the students together to teach them how to be leaders in their own communities. Participants of the program will be in Wilmington on Tuesday, July 23, for an evening event that is open to the public.

The Jerusalem Peacebuilders Leadership Institute holds programs in several locations in the United States, including Texas, Connecticut, and Vermont. Nestled among the green of mountains and trees, a cluster of small wooden buildings comprises the program's Vermont campus. One building is a breezy cabin decorated with antiques, art, and textiles. It serves as the staff's office. In another, participants take in lectures in an open air classroom. On Tuesday morning, in a yard behind the largest of the buildings, participants engage in a game of tug of war that will ultimately culminate in a peace-building lesson.

Program director Jack Karn says the work participants will engage in over the next two weeks includes bolstering skills in conflict resolution, peace-building, identity, and communication. "They'll have dialogues about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, about social justice issues, about youth issues, and about religion."

Karn says the religion aspect of the program sets the Jerusalem Peacebuilders Leadership Institute apart from other programs with focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We're using Islam, Christianity, and Judaism as a way to connect the teens by looking at what is different between them but also what is shared between them," he says. "We're using religion as a tool for how to look at reconciliation. Because of the deep wounds of this conflict, because of the long history, it's our belief that it's through God's help — the divine will — that this conflict will be transformed, and through Muslims, Christians, and Jews working together to do that across the world."

The goal of the program, Karn says, is that participants will bring the skills they develop back to their communities. "It's about taking the skills they've learned and bringing them out to the public sphere," he says. "How do we practice leadership, and how do we take those empowering experiences back to our home communities and enact or continue them."

Several of the teen participants say that until they attended the program, they had never spoken to, let alone known, people from the opposite community.

"I live 15 minutes from a Jewish village," says Yafa Nassar, who is Palestinian and lives in Arraba, located in the lower Galilee. "I'd never had a conversation with a Jewish person about these issues. We're not allowed to talk about it."

She says before she participated last summer, she held engrained stereotypes about Jews. "That they're all killers, they took my home, I don't want to talk to them, and they're enemies. But when I came here, I became friends with many Jewish people. And I didn't expect that. It was really surprising for me." Noam Williams, who is Jewish and is from Netanya in the northern central district of Israel, says before he attended the institute last year, he held beliefs similar to Yafa's, but about Arabs.

"When I told people at home I was going to come here with Arabs and Jews, they said, 'Wow, that's a bit scary.' The thing that made me who I am today was the interaction last year with Arab people, with multiple traditions and nationalities in one camp. It was amazing, because I was able to create my own identity."

Both Yafa and Noam participated in the Jerusalem Peacebuilders Leadership Institute last year. They say they were filled with hope while they were at the program, but it was disheartening to return home.

"The camp was really peaceful and was not stressful," says Noam. "When I came back home, the reality hit my face. It was really pessimistic and sad. It was tough, really tough, to adjust again to the community and to my lifestyle. During the two weeks I was really positive. We have hope for peace in the camp. But I was shocked to realize that most of the people in Israel don't have hope."

Yafa says she hopes that she can change minds at home. "It's more powerful when we talk to young people like us, our friends and siblings. They can relate to our stories."

"After the camp, whenever I heard stereotypes about Arabs, I immediately came to defend my Arab friends," says Noam. "I think it's more powerful when it comes from me, because I'm sure that I know better than all of the kids in my school. They only know one side, but I know the Palestinian narrative as well as the Jewish narrative."

Noam says he never would have imagined he could have the experience he's having. "I never thought I would say a sentence like, 'I listened to music and sang with a Palestinian and an American Jew in Vermont.' It's a big thing for me to be here."

This is the first year that George Abu Dauod, who lives in Nazareth but is from Kafr Kanna, is participating. He says he is seeking clarity from the setting of the camp. "All the green around you makes you think and

reflect,” he says. “I want to grow spiritually, to know myself better in terms of where I’m going next and who I am going to be.”

Amran Shimaly, who is a resident assistant at the institute for the first time this summer, is not Israeli or Palestinian. He’s Syrian and is from Ghajar, an Alawite-Arab village on the border between Lebanon and the Israeli-occupied portion of the Golan Heights. Ghajar is isolated and Shimaly, who is an English teacher, says he sought to become involved in a program like the Jerusalem Peacebuilders Leadership Institute. He hopes it can help him create leadership aspirations in his own students.

“What (Jerusalem Peacebuilders Leadership Institute) does is help people to know each other more,” says Shimaly. “To think about the conflict and their life. That we can solve it, and look at it in a different way. We can deal with others in a different way. To put ourselves in their shoes. If you want to judge someone, you have to be in his place and then you can judge him.”

Rev. Nicholas Porter founded the institute in 2011. “This was part of a dream of a lifetime,” he says. The program began with 11 students attending one program in Brattleboro. In the eight years that have followed, it’s grown: this summer, over 120 people will participate in five programs.

Porter says that the recognition the program has received can feel both “wonderful and unbelievable.” He acknowledges that the size of the conflict can make it easy to feel daunted.

“We’re contributing to solutions for a very painful conflict, and it sometimes feels like we’re not making progress,” he says. But, at the same time, there are victories to celebrate, which make him aware of the impact his work is having. He says in June, a graduate of the program won the highest academic award in Israel. “And he’s not a Jew. He’s a Palestinian Arab,” he says. “He broke through a glass barrier. In breaking through, he also changed his environment. He did great things, always, and by doing great things he inspired people around him to change. Twenty-five years ago, he would not have been given that. It would have been given to a nice Jewish boy, literally. By breaking the barrier as a Palestinian Christian, he’s made space for a Jewish girl, or a Palestinian woman, or a Druze to get that award.”

Porter is the pastor at St. Mary’s in the Mountains in Wilmington. He says that although his work with the institute preceded his work at St. Mary’s, the congregation is supportive of the work.

“They understand that my doing this work is part of their witness to God’s love,” he says. “When I have to go, they say, ‘We’ve got this. Go.’ It’s really beautiful and it’s become a way that a small congregation in a small town connects to the biggest, most real issues in the world. They’re there.”

It’s at St. Mary’s that the participants will be part of an evening with the public on Tuesday, July 23.

“The purpose is to create engagement between the people of the Deerfield Valley and these young Israeli, Palestinian, and American students,” he says. “The first step to getting change is knowledge and encounter. There can’t be change without encounter.”

The event will begin at 6 pm and will be followed by a reception. All are invited to attend.

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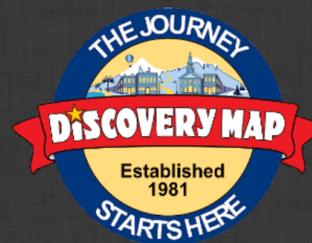
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