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OPINION

Guest opinion: With teens, former Southport cleric sows seeds of Mideast peace

By **Don Hyman**

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An international trio of campers at Jerulasem Peacebuilders team up for a canoe trip on the Connecticut River. From left are Palestinian Leen Baransah, American Mike Pardee and Israeli Inbar Navon.
Fairfield Citizen/Contributed

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Their group, Jerusalem Peacebuilders, is an interfaith, nonprofit organization that promotes transformational encounters among the people of Jerusalem and elsewhere in the Middle East. Its focus, however, completely bypasses today's political, diplomatic, religious and military leaders.

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Instead, Jerusalem Peacebuilders focuses on young people from Israel, Palestine, the U.S. and elsewhere who may likely be taking those same influential roles tomorrow.

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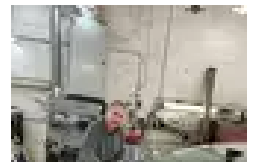
More than 160 carefully selected young people have been through the program since it began in 2011, said the Rev. [Nicholas Porter](#), who led the [Southport church](#) for nearly nine years before starting Peacebuilders.

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"We work on giving these teenagers the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to be advocates for inclusive democracy in their homelands, whether they be Jewish or Arab," Porter said. "The process is like growing trees. It is slow, but it works, and great

things will come from it," said Porter, who founded the program together with his wife Dorothy.

Porter and his wife left their home in Southport to create Jerusalem Peacebuilders, which is based in a camp they've created on a farm in Brattleboro, Vt. Parallel programs have been launched in Texas and, just recently this year, in Jerusalem. Porter planned to fly to Jerusalem after the Christmas holiday period.

Fairfield residents leading programs at the camp or supporting the organization in other ways include, among others, Realtor and [Planning and Zoning Commission](#) member [Joan Neiley](#); Rabbi [James Prosnit](#), senior rabbi at Congregation B'nai Israel in Bridgeport; filmmaker [Tom Reilly](#); investor and financier [Amer Nimr](#) and [Andrea Azarm](#).

"Whether they lead programs with the kids or provide generous funding, we're grateful to a number of people from the Fairfield area who support the camp and make it happen each summer," Porter said.

Porter said the programs all focus on a "theory of change" curriculum with four components: leadership training, relationship-building skills, interfaith education and social justice.

"We want these kids to make lifelong relationships through our program.," he said. "We want them to understand one another's faith, because if you respect someone's religion, you respect the deepest part of that person. We want them to become strong and resilient so they don't cave in to extremism. We want to engage them in discussions about racism, sexism, bigotry, environmental issues and the rule of law versus violence."

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In the new program getting underway in Jerusalem, parents of teenagers attending after-school sessions also will be involved. Porter said parental involvement encourages discussion and helps to spread and reinforce the ideas introduced to teenagers by Jerusalem Peacebuilders.

The programs are popular with participants, and nearly 90 percent indicate they want to return for continued study and activity. The small size of the effort today is not daunting to its supporters.

"This year, Hanukkah and Christmas arrived very close together. Both holidays are about a great promise and hope coming out of something small. Hanukkah's story involves the wonder of a small oil lamp that burned miraculously for eight days. Christmas involves the birth of the Christ child. Both events are small in scale, and yet they speak to the divine promise of humanity," Porter said.

For more information on the program's activities, visit www.jerusalempeacebuilders.org.