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## Commentary: A night to remember

By Lissa Weinmann

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"People are looking in the windows. Do you think we should close the shades?" the young man asked.

"We like people looking in," I answered. "It brings light and life into this edge of town."

"But some of the girls are wearing hijabs," he said. I could see the concern in his eyes about the veils. He was an American just returned after a year living in Israel to a United States roiled by anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim rancor.

"I think it's fine — this is Brattleboro," I said. The bubbling group of 80 Iraqi, Palestinian, Israeli and local teens were shouting and bouncing to the thumping base of the global hit-of-the-moment "Despacito," unaware of his, or any other concerns. He relaxed; his fear invaded me like a contagion. Should I be concerned?

I quickly shook off my anxiety. The laughing, dancing teens, ice cream and euphoria of a most unusual, illuminating evening would soon draw to a close — and all was well.

I was thrilled to host this Thursday, July 28 event at 118 Elliot with colleagues from the Windham World Affairs Council, where I am a board member, and Nicholas Porter, who with his wife Dorothy runs Jerusalem Peacebuilders, a camp that brings Israeli and Palestinian teenagers together to create dialogue, extend understanding and shape future leaders committed to peace. The organization is based in Brattleboro where they quietly host the camp every July. Porter asked if we could organize an event where the teens would join celebrated director Stephen Apkon at the space for a screening and community discussion of his new film "Disturbing the Peace."

The film is about Israeli and Palestinian soldiers disgusted by the useless cycle of violence (they helped perpetuate), who laid down arms to form a growing movement called "Combatants for Peace." Apkon said that he was invited to make a film about the conflict but had initially refused, thinking there was nothing new to say. That changed when he learned about Combatants for Peace, which he said was on the short list for

this year's Nobel Peace Prize. "These people have the courage to challenge the stories we all get stuck on — hero and villain — victim and perpetrator. Leaders use fear and separation, but we elect them and we have the power to change the narrative."

The film included violent imagery from both sides of this ongoing conflict and, although the current situation seems in some ways worse than ever, the teens shared a hopeful attitude for their future. "I want to be able to look at the situation from all sides," one Palestinian Muslim girl who lives in Israel said. "We have to do that if we are going to be able to make peace one day." An Israeli teen said the film made him feel "ambitious about solving the problem."

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The gravity of the event was magnified by 50 Iraqi teens here for the month of July who attended as part of a conflict resolution program at Brattleboro's School for International Training, supported by the US Embassy in Baghdad. Local hero, John Ungerleider, has been bringing these visitors here through World Learning's Youth Peacebuilding and Leadership Programs which has served more than 7,000 young leaders from communities in conflict since 1990.

Some local teens came too, painting a big welcome sign and baking cookies for the event. "It's cool we can have everyone here without people getting all up in a fuss about it," one local teen said, adding she'd already shared Instagrams with some of the visitors, and she wished there was more time to get to know them.

"Many camp participants have never experienced such an environment of openness and respect before, especially while discussing this painful conflict," Porter said. "Honestly, this environment is why Jerusalem Peacebuilders operates its flagship leadership program in this area. The local ethos of listening and learning — especially when you disagree — allows these teens to reach new heights as they commit themselves to peace and to one another."

On the way home, I saw, as if for the first time, the signs in several languages saying: "All are welcome here." These teens will return home to bombs, violence, division and an almost constant sense of foreboding. I am grateful our community offers its citizens opportunities to interact with the world in such personal ways and proud that visitors can feel, and are safe here. It was a night to remember that our community epitomizes precious values we must vigilantly protect.

Lissa Weinmann lives in Brattleboro and is co-owner and director of 118 Elliot, an arts and educational space in downtown Brattleboro, and a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute in New York. The opinions expressed by columnists do not necessarily reflect the views of the Brattleboro Reformer.