

Israelis and Palestinians come together for art

Youth program builds dialogue out of paint and clay

By Elise Kigner Advocate Staff



Israeli Jewish and Palestinian youth express themselves through a mural at Boston College.

By age 18 they will be soldiers in the army, fighting for the state of Israel. But that is a year or so away, and for now, they are just a group Israeli teens spending a few weeks of the summer in Boston, working on art projects with Palestinian teens.

Artsbridge, now in its second year, brings 26 Palestinian and Israeli youth ages 15-17 to Boston College for three weeks of art lessons and structured dialogue. The participants, who come from Neve Shalom, Haifa, Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem, learn leadership skills and art techniques for creating

pottery, film, painting and photography.

Ohad Hoffman, 32, is a dialogue facilitator at Artsbridge.

"This is something that they are going to take with them in this phase of life. It's going to help them go through [military service] in a more humane way," said Hoffman, who is from Jerusalem.

For their final art projects, a Jewish Israeli and a Palestinian are paired up to create something that can be about the conflict, but does not have to be, said Deborah Nathan, Artsbridge's executive director. When they go home, the program's graduates mentor preteens at their local community centers. Last year, 150 children were mentored.

On Monday, a week into the program, a group of Israelis and Palestinians lounged on a couch at Boston's College Ignacio Hall, while another group worked on a wall mural. When the teens first started working on the mural, they couldn't come to a consensus about what they wanted to draw, so they all just picked up pencils and started sketching. The mural pictured a wall with a grenade over it on one side, and on the other, a tree with an eye in the branches.

"The tree sees all, but he can't do anything," explained one student.

After a morning of film, visual arts and ceramics classes, the teens engage in structured dialogue in the afternoon. One person asks questions, another person answers, and the rest of the group thinks about how the answers make them feel, and how they can relate it to their own lives. Nathan calls this the formula for teaching empathy.

Haneen Magadlh, 26, a dialogue facilitator from Baqa Al Garbiah, said there are teens in the program who have never met Jews who are not soldiers, and she hopes Artsbridge gives Jews and Palestinians a healthier way of learning about each other.

"I want them to have another life, to deal with conflict in another way," she said.

Last year, Yazan Assad, a peer facilitator, produced a film with his Israeli partner called "We Should Stop Fighting." It depicts a dream of an Israeli and a Palestinian who work together to escape from a forest. Remembering the dream, they reject their friends' invitations to retaliate for an Arab stabbing in the Old City and an attack by the Israeli army.

Assad, 17, said at first he was unsure of the concept of Muslim Jewish dialogue.

"Before coming, I thought it was a weird idea," said Assad, who is from Ramallah. "After I started the program, it felt normal."

An art therapist and mental health counselor, Nathan has practiced art therapy with innercity youth in Lynn, gaining a sense of how to deal with children who feel hopeless and disempowered. The Swampscott resident said she first started thinking about Israeli-Palestinian dialogue when she lived in Israel in the late 1970s.

"It was a different time then, but even still the idea of enemies and boundaries and borders was very curious to me," said Nathan. "I began to realize that when we define ourselves by our boundaries and by our nationalities, then conflict arises. Then the lack of trust and the lack of safety are huge issues."

In January, she plans to implement two new local programs that integrate art and dialogue. One initiative will partner a Muslim day school and Jewish day school, and the other will partner schools in America, Israel and Jordan.

Though Nathan hopes to expand Artsbridge, she is still struggling to fund this year's program. It will cost \$110,000 to run the summer program, \$40,000 of which still needs to be raised. She has had little luck getting funding from the Jewish and Palestinian communities in the area, but some small donations have come from unexpected places.

This year, Artsbridge received \$1,500 from a Marblehead Middle School student who fundraised for Artsbridge as part of her bat mitzvah project.

On Aug. 6, Artsbridge will host an exhibit of the students' final projects from 6:30-9:30 p.m. at Boston College. For more information, call 781-775-7981.