

Sparks of Change Brings Jewish and Arab Young People Together

Jewish and Arab teenagers in Israel lack opportunities to interact meaningfully with each other. This spring, Oranim International School spearheaded a groundbreaking program bringing a mixed group of Jewish and Arab high school students and teachers from Israel together to the United States.



In spring 2016, Oranim International School facilitated the first ever Sparks of Change delegation thanks to the generous investment of the Sparks of Change Foundation. A group of Jewish and Arab high school students and teachers from Israel, led by Dr. Roberta Bell-Kligler, travelled together to the United States for a ten-day program including encounters with American high school students (Jewish and non-Jewish), home hospitality, and touring. The delegation aimed to promote coexistence among the Israelis and to enable American high school students to learn about the complexity and potential of life in Israel.

Half an Hour Away but Different Worlds

The delegation included two students and one teacher from the Arabic speaking Al Bian School in Dir al-Asad, and two students and one teacher from the Hebrew speaking Misgav School. Although the two high schools are less than a half-hour drive from one another, the participants had never met students from the other school before. Before the delegation, the Arab participants had minimal to no contact with Jews, and so too the Jews with the Arabs. None of the participants had been to the United States before. The opportunity for the Jewish and Arab participants to spend ten intensive days together in the United States was transformative.

A Trip of a Lifetime

During the trip, the delegation participated in intensive encounters with students from the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School and the Park School (a non-Jewish private school) in Maryland, exposing them to different aspects of American society. At both schools, the Israelis enjoyed home hospitality and

spent time at the school. They engaged in dialogue with the American students about what it is like to live in Israel as a teenager, and what their experiences are of the Jewish-Arab conflict. The delegation also had the opportunity to go on a weekend camping retreat (Shabbaton) with the Charles E. Smith eleventh graders.

In addition, the group enjoyed touring Washington D.C. and New York City (including a Broadway show!). In New York City, they had a short encounter with Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Miller High School students.

In the words of the participants: “Every day was a new and different highlight and every day was special... I am happy that we were able to get the most out of everything;” and, “Whatever I write wouldn’t describe how amazing the trip was for me... It’s a trip of a lifetime.”

Program Impact

In their program evaluations, participants in the delegation reported that they learned about new cultures and to accept people who are different than them. As one participant explained: “Kids started to get to know the others and started to accept them even though they are different.” Not only did the Jews and Arabs from Israel get to know one another and their cultures, but they also got to know American teens and Jewish American society better. One participant summed up the impact of the program: “It definitely made me a better person.”

Participants strengthened their commitment to coexistence. They described their insights: “It deepened my understanding that we and the next generation must work harder in order to make a change. I am certainly motivated to contribute as much as I can.” Another participant explained: “After every discussion, I understood more and more that despite the gaps and disagreements, it is very important that we cooperate and this will benefit both sides. Therefore, after this journey, I support coexistence to a much greater extent, and understand its importance in the complex reality that exists.”

Participants plan on bringing these insights back to their communities and acting on them. One participant wrote, “I want to start with my friends and try to get them to see what I see now and who knows maybe it’ll lead to a bigger group of people seeing coexistence as an important thing as I do.” Both teachers wrote about sharing their insights from the project with their students, and their commitment to working on similar projects in the future that bring together Jewish and Arab high school students.

Sparks of Change Foundation

This program was made possible by the Sparks of Change Foundation. The Foundation was established in honor of Daniel Joseph Siegel, a young man who died from a brain tumor in November 2010. Daniel always strived to be a ‘changer,’ a person whose actions would make a difference to others. The Foundation honors his life by supporting programs that are involved in changing communities and creating a better world.