



Yaseen Natsheh (Palestinian)

Barry L. Cain

If you see a sea of purple shirts in the northern suburbs or downtown Chicago, you'll know that Hands of Peace is back in session! From July 17 to August 2, Hands of Peace, a small, local non-profit organization dedicated to fostering peace in the Middle East person by person, will bring in students from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to learn about peaceful coexistence. Jewish Israeli, Arab-Citizens-of-Israel and West Bank Palestinian teens stay in local homes with host families, and join American teens in daily dialogue sessions, team-building exercises and cultural activities during the intensive two-week program.

Past participants use words like "moving" "powerful" "unforgettable" "amazing" "wonderful" and "it changed my outlook on life" to describe their experiences with the program. [Hands of Peace has shaped their perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their ideas about their futures.] Itamar Levy, a Jewish student from Israel who participated in 2006 and 2007, reflects, "Hands of Peace changed me; they are humans on the other side, and we should want peace! I learned that hoping for peace is good, but if we won't deal with it straight to the face, it will never happen." Carrie Hanson, a Christian American participant in 2008, says, "It taught me a great deal about human nature and the capacity of the human spirit."

# HANDS OF PEACE BUILDS FUTURE LEADERS

by Maggie Cain, Adam Heffez and Julie Kanak

*"We can do what politicians can't." - Mohammed (West Bank Palestinian Hands of Peace participant 2007)*

Safaya Fawsi-Youssef, a Muslim student from Northbrook, appreciated the opportunity for teenagers to change their focus. "We think the world is about us. Hands of Peace helped us all to see something greater and to learn that a me-first attitude won't solve problems." She had visited family in Egypt many times, but being a Hand, she finds her trips enriched. "I can more deeply understand my cousins' experiences and thoughts." Like several past participants, Safaya hopes to pursue studies in peace and conflict resolution when she goes to college.

Hands of Peace began during the spring of 2002, when neighbors and good friends Gretchen Grad (Glenview Community Church member) and Deanna Jacobson (Congregation BJBE member) were discussing how glad they were their young children were growing up with peers of different faiths. The Jacobson boys had enjoyed decorating Easter Eggs and hanging ornaments on the Grads' Christmas tree. Likewise, the Grad girls had been known to win big when playing dreidel and were very comfortable with the rituals of Shabbat. While all four children were grounded in their own religious traditions, they were being brought up to respect different faiths and to appreciate and enjoy the customs and culture they offer.

Deanna and Gretchen had a vision to spread cultural understanding beyond their own homes and foster it in youth from one of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world—the Middle East.

They believed that bringing Israeli and Palestinian teens together in a safe, supportive, and neutral setting could begin a dialogue to plant the seeds of understanding. While they realized that cultural appreciation alone is not enough to mend the animosities that have fueled generations of conflict, they recognized that creating an environment that helps put a face on the "enemy" is necessary groundwork for peaceful coexistence.

Gretchen and Deanna enlisted the help of Islamic Cultural Center (ICC) member Nuha Dabbouseh. Together, the three women drafted a plan for the program and secured the sponsorship of Glenview Community Church, BJBE and the ICC. They began soliciting support from individual donors and local businesses. Hands of Peace was born.

Now in its seventh summer, the Hands of Peace program is going strong. This July, 21 Middle Eastern teens will join 16 American participants. During their two weeks in the U.S., the Middle East



All 2008 Participants

Tina Plunkett

and American kids are involved in daily two-hour dialogue sessions led by trained adult facilitators, some from the Middle East and some from the U.S.

The dialogue sessions put a human face on the “other” and create opportunities for the participants to hear and understand the various perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They provide an opportunity for Israeli and Palestinian teens to have honest, powerful connections in ways not possible for them at home.

In dialogue sessions and throughout the program, Hands of Peace introduces American teens to the Middle East conflict and encourages them to expand their knowledge of Israeli and Palestinian history and current relations.

In addition to the daily dialogue sessions, the participants visit cultural and sightseeing sites in the Chicago area. They participate in team-building and conflict-resolution exercises, and they all attend Jewish, Christian, and Muslim services hosted by three affiliated congregations.

A few Middle Eastern and American teens from previous years serve as big brothers and big sisters to those coming for the first time. These

Extraordinary Leaders (XL’s) participate in a leadership-training program designed specifically for them. All participants are part of an ongoing follow-up program to build on their summer experience. Regular meetings are held throughout the year in both Jerusalem and Chicago to support the integration of new and evolving beliefs, behaviors and social connections into their existing environments. All past participants are encouraged to discuss pertinent topics on a listserve, sustaining and deepening their relationships.

During their two-week stay, the teens from the Middle East live with local host families who get an up close and personal opportunity to learn about life in the region. For host families as well, Hands of Peace provides a powerful and life-changing experience. The Anderson/O’Brien family of Glenview has hosted Middle East teens since the first summer of Hands of Peace. Sheila O’Brien remarks, “We may never know what effect we have made on Middle East problems or even on these individual kids. Maybe someday, though, one of these kids will serve in the Knesset. Maybe one of the conversations we had at the dinner table will impact a future leader in the Middle East.” Terri Bernsohn, another host, has kept up the relationship with



Akram Sublaban (Palestinian), Diane Hund (American), Charlie Corbett (American) and Mohammed Khadeer

## *Hands of Peace welcomes your involvement*



Inbal Magen (Israeli)  
and Afreen Khadeer (American)

For more information,  
go to our website,  
[www.hands-of-peace.org](http://www.hands-of-peace.org)

- Join our mailing list –  
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her two young guests and visited them on a recent trip to Israel. "It was a great pleasure to get to meet the parents of these young women we've come to love, and an even greater pleasure to see that HOP friendships extend beyond the participants, and that Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli parents and the siblings of the HOP alumni have also developed meaningful relationships from the participants' shared experience."

Former host and current Board Chair Debby Fosdick reminisces about past years. "We certainly didn't make peace. But every one of these kids now knows that the enemy has a face. A very human face that, if only for 2 weeks,

they learned to love. I have to believe that this makes a difference."

Hands of Peace is also committed to educating and involving local adults beyond the summer program. Performances of *Stand Up for Peace (The Two Comedian Solution for Middle East Peace)* and the play *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* brought local audiences together. HOP's Spring Lecture Series drew people interested in such topics as atheism, globalization and Iran. In 2007, after reading the bestselling book *The Faith Club*, HOP formed its own Club, encouraging members to discuss their differing beliefs and experiences. This month, HOP will co-sponsor and participate in

the International Conference on Globalization for the Common Good at Loyola University.

Hands of Peace has been recently recognized for its work. Michael Rigali, son of HOP Executive Director Julie Kanak, entered Hands of Peace in the international "Heard the World" contest, sponsored by the band O.A.R. (Of A Revolution). HOP won second prize for its work to build a better world. Founder Gretchen Grad received the Social Entrepreneur of the Year award from Hamilton Ventures at the United Nations for her work with the program, and also the Public Service Award from her M.B.A. class at the University of Chicago.

Glenview student, Hand and XL, Diane Hund is grateful for the friends HOP has given her and the opportunity to be part of something bigger than herself. "It opened my eyes to the extent of suffering that takes place outside my little world," she says. Another former participant and XL, Emily Sullivan, now encourages her peers to realize how fortunate they are. She also says, "Recognize that history is not always right and can be very biased." Diane agrees, "HOP also helped me realize not everything I read or hear is exactly the truth, and to question the validity of information, especially involving politics and the government and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." Emily continues, "The only way to become more open-minded is by challenging your own thoughts and ideas and trying to reach out to the other side for their input."

Nadine Abboud, an Arab-Israeli "Hand" and XL sums it up "I have never thought that a person with political opinions that totally contradict my own could be a wonderful friend, a person who I can trust and can agree with on many issues that do not relate to politics...things that are much deeper and much stronger than political disputes."

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