

Reflections on Kids4Peace

By Elizabeth Nies Greeley

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Last summer I went to Kids4Peace, a camp for kids who are Christians, Muslims and Jews from Israel, Palestine, and the US. It's a program to help kids in Israel and the US learn about peace. It was the experience of a lifetime. I met new kids, who will be my friends for life. It was so different from a regular summer camp, although we did lots of fun camp activities. Not only did I learn about other religions and cultures, I also learned about teamwork and peace. Everybody thinks peace is about no wars and equality between everyone, but it's actually about learning that everyone is different. Whether it is a big difference or small, peace is about acknowledging everyone's differences, embracing them, and still being able to love one another.

While at Kids4Peace, I became friends with Asia, a Muslim girl with 8 siblings from Boston, Noam, a Jewish girl from Jerusalem, and Morgan, a Christian girl from Newton. Being with 24 people of different religions, races, nationalities for 2 weeks was wonderful, because there were no distractions, I really got to focus on the people around me and their different backgrounds. While playing games is a great way to make friends, you never really become great friends with someone unless you share memories and experiences, deep thoughts and emotions, all the while not being afraid of what others think. At Kids4Peace, we swam, rock-climbed and canoed. But we also sat in a circle and shared our beliefs and lives, which brought us close in such a short time. and was different from normal camp. We laughed together but we also cried; it was nothing like a regular camp because everything we did was about getting to know each other beneath the surface. It was intimate.

At first, I thought Kids4Peace was a religious camp, that we would only learn about different faith traditions. I expected lengthy lectures--like a religious summer school-- which does not sound appealing at all to a kid. But, boy, was I wrong! We got to do fun things like hiking, swimming, Duck tours, archery, and hanging out eating apples. But also it taught me about peace and the differences between people in a fun but serious way. We learned to sing in Hebrew and Arabic and witnessed ceremonies at a mosque, a monastery, and a temple. The team activities were very symbolic, because it joined people like Yosef, an Orthodox Jew with Nicolle, an Arab Muslim and me, a Chinese-American Christian. Despite our Hebrew-Arabic-English language barriers, not knowing each other well, and having different backgrounds, we were still able to work together to solve problems. So, shouldn't adults be able to?

On Tuesday, April 8th, I went to hear a talk by Kids4Peace's own former Jerusalem head, Yakir Englander. Yakir was raised as an Orthodox Jew in a strict Hasidic community where he spent hours reading the Talmud, following the rebbe, and playing the violin. He thought Arabs were not human on the same level as Jews. Then he left his community and joined the Israeli Defence Force where, as his job, he picked up the bodies of victims of the violence. He said that when he was holding the flesh in his hands and hugging the dead bodies as he carried them, he knew that they were human, too.

When Yakir was talking, what stood out to me was how strong Kids4Peace really is. All anyone can really hope is that Kids4Peace will help the world's nations come together and be peaceful. But we can never know if that will really happen. What if people just leave Kids4Peace in the summer and return unchanged? Yakir shared stories with us that were awesome because they really showed Kids4Peace's goals at work. One story was about his mom, who was afraid of Arabs all her life (and she had never met one)--she thought they might kill her with a knife. But, when going to see her son give a talk, she got hugged by the Palestinian leader of Kids4Peace Jerusalem, a warm woman with a hijab. His mom thought at first that she was going to stab her, but she realized that these people were peaceful. A few

weeks later, when Yakir's family member spoke about "Dirty Arabs," she defended them, saying to her relative, "You shouldn't judge until you have hugged one! I have hugged one! I know them! Stop talking that way!"

Another story Yakir told was about the military chief of the checkpoint between Israel and the West Bank. The first year, the officer, who was very stern, was reluctant to give visas to the Arab children to join Kids4Peace and to go to the US. But, a year later, this stern man called up Yakir, asking, "why there weren't more visas needed? There should be a thousand visas for Kids4Peace." Yakir said, "You say you want to give a thousand visas? Isn't that like not having a checkpoint?" The officer replied, "Interesting." It's in moments like these that I realize that what we are doing is good, and it's working, and it's not only affecting the kids but the adults as well. These stories, and my own experience, give me hope that peace will spread.

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