

Gina Miles wins silver medal in equestrian 'eventing' at the Olympic Games. Page 17

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PEACE CAMP

MENLO PARK RESIDENT BRINGS ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS TO A SUMMER SPORTS CAMP IN THE U.S.

TEAMING UP FOR PEACE

MENLO PARK RESIDENT BRINGS ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS TO SUMMER SPORTS CAMP IN THE U.S.

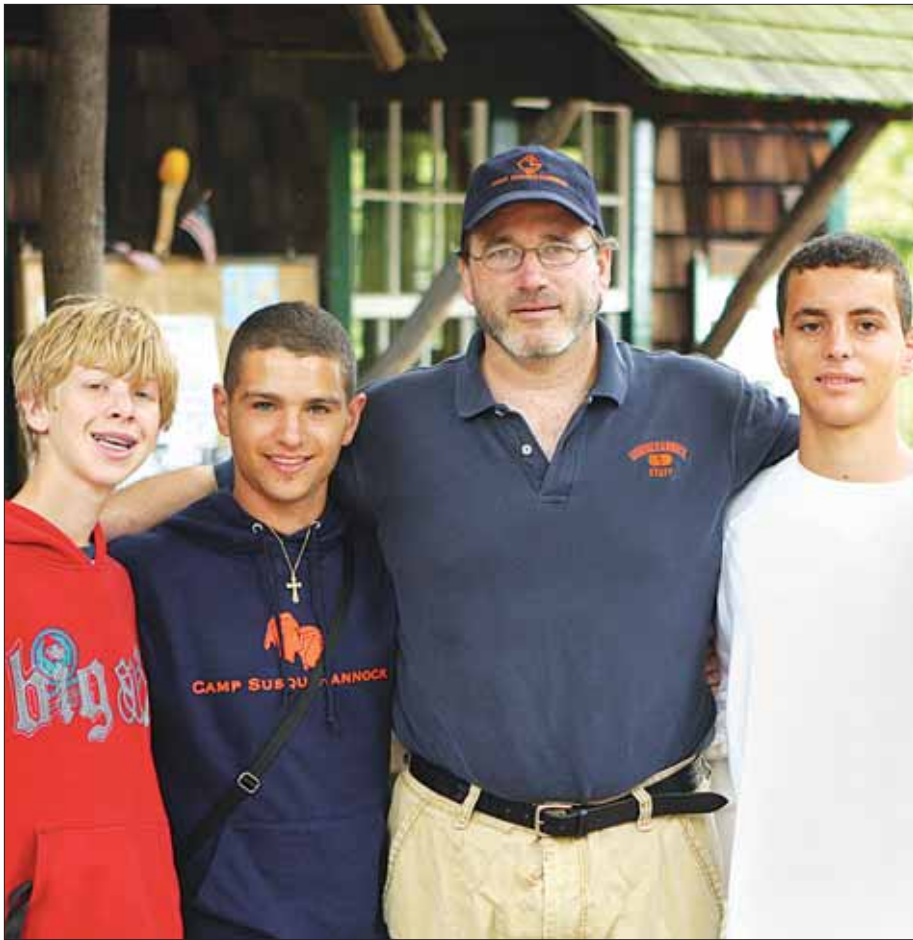


Photo by Josh Orylton

By Selena Simmons-Duffin

Special to the Almanac

Robert Kent never expected to find himself brushing shoulders with actress Maggie Gyllenhaal and Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry's, lying in a peace sign-festooned bed, and spooning a new ice cream flavor before a crowd in Times Square.

Yet this past May, there he was, as he accepted a Ben & Jerry's "Peace Pioneer" award for founding an organization called the Peace Camp Initiative to bring together Israeli Jews and Palestinians in a traditional American summer camp.

After Times Square, the Menlo Park resident headed to the Pennsylvania wilderness, where he awaited the arrival of three boys from Israel — one Jewish, one Christian, and one Muslim — who were the first recipients of scholarships from the Peace Camp Initiative. Over the next few weeks, the three boys lived and played with students from all over the country and the world.

It is a kind of grand experiment — one man's attempt to do something good with a lifetime of organizational connections and the aplomb to follow through on an epiphany.

From belief to action

Although the idea for the initiative has been floating around for some 20 years, the push to make it a reality happened in the fall of 2006 when Mr. Kent sat down to write a submission for NPR's

"This I Believe" essay series.

"I believe that the incandescent joy of a happy child transcends every ethnic and economic distinction humankind has invented to keep us apart," he wrote. "I believe that every prejudice, every oppression, every resentment, and every misunderstanding can be cured more quickly by mixing everyone's children together, making two teams, and letting them play than by any form of conflict resolution, court intercession, or legislation we've come up with so far."

Mr. Kent's background makes clear how this belief has informed his life course. He is a third-degree black belt aikido instructor, and directs the youth program at the Aikido West school in Redwood City. He is also a program director at a summer camp in Pennsylvania called Camp Susquehannock, where he has been involved in some capacity for the last 32 years.

Two weeks after he finished his essay, he realized his statement of belief could be the impetus for action. He spoke to his friend and fellow aikido instructor Jamie Zimron about her work using aikido for conflict resolution in the Middle East, and had the idea to found a scholarship program to send several kids from Israel and Palestine to Camp Susquehannock. Soon, the Peace Camp Initiative was born.

"Magic in Play"

Mr. Kent's practice of aikido serves as the vehicle for the pro-

gram. His aikido work fostered the support of Budo for Peace and Aiki-extensions — both organizations work in Israel with young martial artists of both Jewish and Palestinian descent, providing the population of students Mr. Kent draws on for the scholarships.

The students who receive scholarships through the Peace Camp Initiative already have a background in martial arts (both aikido and other forms such as karate), and experience training with students from the other side of the conflict. Having studied

tage of Camp Susquehannock's 103-year-old traditions of sportsmanship: "It's about the integrity with which you play, sportsmanship, the pleasure of trying hard," Mr. Kent says. "I think there's magic in play — that's the magic I'm tapping into here."

Long-awaited arrival

For three weeks this summer, Adam Horovitz, Zahi Tuama and Ahmed Hamudi went to Camp Susquehannock, and for all of them, the experience exceeded expectations.

camp, but because of the process of getting visas and traveling to America, not because they were all from Israel.

Zahi explained that the other American campers in the camp were very welcoming, and after the first week, didn't press them for details about their background. "They didn't actually care where we're from and what we are. They just want to know who is there. They just want to know me."

Adam added that getting past those details of the ethnic con-



Photo by Veronica Weber/The Almanac

'This is just one guy's modest attempt to try to make a difference just because the pieces seemed to fit naturally. Sometimes the world sits up and notices and tries to help.'

ROBERT KENT OF MENLO PARK

martial arts, "the kids are already comfortable with the idea of conflict occurring with a limited chance of violence," Mr. Kent says. "They are predisposed to think that the right solution is one in which all the kids are working towards a post-partisan future."

At the camp, the kids are ordinary campers, learning popular American sports such as lacrosse and baseball, studying aikido with Mr. Kent, and meeting other campers from all over the world.

In this way, the kids take advan-

"The people here are so nice and everybody cares about each other. The spirit of the place is so amazing," said Zahi, a 15-year-old aikido student. "This camp is really special."

Ahmed agreed. The visa of the 16-year-old karate student almost didn't get approved in time to visit the camp this year, but with the assistance of U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein's office, he was able to come, too.

The three boys listed each other as their closest friends at the

flict is not easy. He is 14 years old and has been studying karate for almost 10 years. "[To] not care what happens in their hometown and only care about who they are — it's something hard to find if you don't look deep enough," he said. "I think whoever let us come here did look deep enough to let us have this chance."

"I think this entire project really will affect us in our life."

Give ice cream a chance

The likelihood that more stu-



Photo by Ann Kent

Zahi Tuama, a 15-year-old aikido student of Palestinian descent, gets flipped over by his aikido instructor, Hanna Jiryis. **Far left:** Peace Camp scholarship students, from left, Adam Horovitz, Zahi Tuama and Ahmed Hamudi stand with Robert Kent on the last day of camp.

dents in the coming years will have the chance that Zahi, Ahmed, and Adam had is much more certain thanks to the Peace Pioneer prize from Ben & Jerry's.

The award was the result of a nationwide search for leaders in contemporary efforts for peace. Of 275 individuals and organizations nominated for the prize, Mr. Kent was one of two winners, and was awarded \$10,000 from the ice cream company.

The prize was awarded in Times Square during a commemorative Peace Bed-In in coordination with the John Lennon Estate and nonprofit Peace One Day. Ben & Jerry's also unveiled a new flavor for the occasion: a caramel ice cream base with toffee and chocolate peace signs called "Imagine Whirled Peace."

"The flavor is really good," attests Mr. Kent.

The prize money paid for the tuition and flight of one Peace Camp student this summer and will also allow Mr. Kent to travel to Israel in the winter. There, he will meet the people he's been working with over the last few years and make new connections. The remainder will pay for another student's scholarship next summer.

Mr. Kent says he is impressed with the sincerity of the Ben & Jerry's company, and thankful for this financial contribution.

"This is just one guy's modest attempt to try to make a difference just because the pieces seemed to fit naturally," Mr. Kent explains. "Sometimes the world sits up and notices and

tries to help."

Hybrid vigor

Mr. Kent's project is truly a cross-cultural, multi-organizational effort that combines Japanese, Middle Eastern, and American cultural influence. (Now that Ben & Jerry's has contributed its support with the "Peace Pioneers" prize, you can add John Lennon's pacifism to the mix.)

This blend makes perfect sense coming from Mr. Kent. In addition to his work at Aikido West and Camp Susquehannock, Mr. Kent is a professor of a course on ethics and aikido at Williams College in Massachusetts and a telecommuter for a Maryland-based tech start-up that makes robotic equipment to sand airplanes.

With Peace Camp, Mr. Kent combines strengths from each of these roles. His academic training in philosophy and ethics draws him to Israel, where, he says, each side has "a seemingly legitimate set of claims." Without an ethnic link on either side, ("I grew up vaguely Presbyterian," he notes), Mr. Kent says he was always interested and kept well informed about the situation in Israel between Jews and Palestinians. He has never visited Israel or done previous activism on the issue.

The start-up work, he explains, gives him background in fundraising and promotion.

In addition, working as a camp counselor for a long time gives him a strong background in conflict resolution. "I'm used to facilitating people hearing each other," Mr.

Kent says. "It's almost always about respect. When you can find a way for people to express their respect they have for the other side, you're most of the way there."

Organization and growth

Mr. Kent still has a long way to go before he reaches his goal of 12 students a year. Even when he had the money for two students to come last summer, the visas took too long to process, so the trips were delayed until this year.

Fundraising, he says, is still in the friends and family realm. He emphasizes the importance of growing organically, and is seeking both individual donations and renewable grants. "Long term viability would be based on some of both," he guesses.

He hopes that next summer will bring a larger group, with both male and female participants, and more formalized teaching and a discussion component for the students.

Ending words

Mr. Kent is modest about founding the Peace Camp Initiative and winning the Peace Pioneers award: "There's a way for everybody to make a difference; this just happens to be my way.

"I have to imagine that for anybody reading this, there's something they thought about trying. The world has already given us permission." ■

For more information, go to the Peace Camp Initiative Web site: <http://peacecampinitiative.org>.

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