

Annual gathering from people across the world aims to promote understanding, lasting peace through dialogue



KEN FRUCHT AND NINA KAUFMAN, from right, listen to Amy Hamar speak at Peacemakers Camp in Groveland on Saturday. Israeli and Palestinian campers joined their American counterparts and others in Yosemite National Park to discuss the conflict in the Middle East.

Exploring common ground in conflict

By Rebecca Rosen Lum
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In a grassy meadow ringed by towering conifers, Greta Dorfman shares a revelation with some 200 people from (29 Holy Land towns,!0 states, Canada and Japan)* gathered on the grass.

Earlier in the day, a woman from the West Bank told her that residents there must navigate scores of checkpoints between villages each day, throwing up maddening obstacles for children going to school or for ambulances racing to hospitals.

"I was surprised to hear about the sheer number of them," said Dorfman, a Santa Rosa resident. "It makes life miserable for people. I knew about border checkpoints, but to envision it between every village -- this I didn't get."

Such revelations fly fast at the fourth annual Peacemakers Camp, for which 240 people, including Israelis and Palestinians from war-torn areas, gathered at Yosemite National Park.

For four days of the Labor Day weekend, participants ranging in age from babies to people in their 70s rose with a rooster's cry to meet, talk, eat and dance.

They shared stories and smashed stereotypes that prevent neighboring peoples from forming a lasting peace.

The camp grew out of a weekly dialogue group begun by Len and Libby Traubman. The San Mateo couple had traveled to the former Soviet Union during the Cold War and made strong connections with individuals despite the enmity between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The Traubmans put their lessons to work in 1992, when they opened their living room to Jews and Arabs eager to hash over the conflict in the Middle East.

Face-to-face relationships could form the heart of international conflict resolution, they reasoned.

Fourteen years later, Living Room Dialogue still meets and has spurred similar groups in the U.S. and Canada. The group has gone after grants and gifts over the past six months to help finance the \$140,000 Peacemakers Camp. Donations sponsored 50 people from 29 villages in Jordan, Israel and the occupied areas, many of whom had never traveled outside their communities.

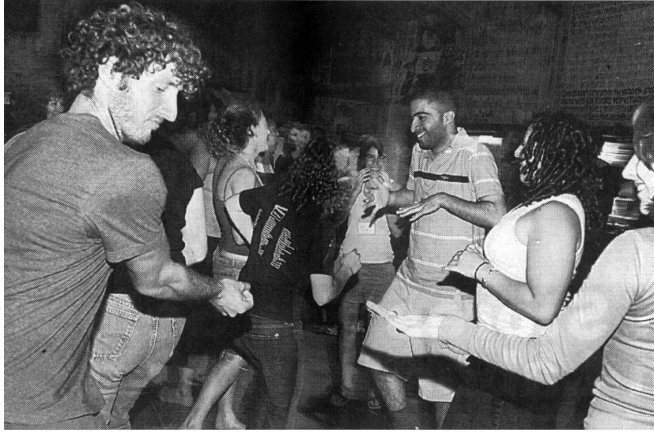
Don't focus on politics, participants are advised. They use workshops, activities and discussion to share individual experiences and find rapport with others.

On Saturday morning, groups of four sat in a rocky amphitheater as they considered such questions as, "What do you think when you hear

the expression suicide bomber?" and "What does the word occupation mean to you?"

After a barbecue lunch, the groups reassembled in the meadow to continue the discussion.

Manar Azriek, a Palestinian woman, told how she was thrown off a bus in Israel while en route to a peace conference. She had been speaking to the mother of one of her students in Arabic on her cell phone when other riders began shouting, "Get her off! Get her off! She's a terrorist," the woman said.



PALESTINIANS AND ISRAELIS hit the dance floor Saturday night at Peacemakers Camp after a dinner and talent show. The camp is a four-day exercise in discussion and understanding.



ILAN LEVENTHAL plays "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" for a talent competition including Israeli, Palestinian and U.S. campers of all ages Saturday during the four-day Peacemakers Camp near Yosemite.

In fluent Hebrew, she told soldiers who had been summoned that she was not a terrorist -- and that they had no right to demand her identification.

"My heart was going brrrrrrrrrr -- pounding," she said.

But this happened "in the face of buses being blown up," commented Ken Frucht of Oakland.

"I take the bus as well," Azriek shot back. "Do you know how many Arabic people are killed this way too? Everybody can stop you on the street and demand your ID. It's like they want me to disappear. They don't want me to speak Arabic."

Palestinians also live with fear, said Amy Hamar, whose husband's family lives in a West Bank village.

"You don't know what fear is," she said. "We were just having a cigarette and talking on the roof of the house and my brother-in-law shouted, 'Get down! They'll see you!' It takes us so long to get downtown because of all the frigging checkpoints."

These are things most Israelis don't understand since they don't travel into the West Bank, Frucht said.

After an exercise in which participants traced each other's hands and listed the traits they share in the overlapping areas, a small group of men gathered in the shade of a tree. The talk turned to suicide bombers.

"You have to understand that comes from a place of extreme desperation," said Adel Nazzai. "You have to give a person a reason to live."

"Are we going to march along raising the stakes, or are we going to get to the root of the problem?" asked Allen Podell, an American Jewish man.

Later, all the campers chatted and laughed through dinner and a talent show. They then flooded onto the dance floor. As Middle Eastern disco music pounded, they whooped and spun and snaked through the hall in a multiethnic conga line.

Rowing, hiking and dancing in these bucolic environs serves a multitude of purposes, Libby Traubman said.

"You're taking people out of their area of conflict," she said. "This would be difficult if they were at home. We're also bringing them to a place that's safe. All their needs are met. This enables us to make a connection in a way that you just can't do if you're standing in a circle talking politics."

YoAv Armoni, who grew up on a Negev kibbutz co-founded by David Ben-Gurion, said his fondest hope is that participants will take home lessons. He wants them "to say, 'I met some Palestinian people and they are not terrorists. They are very nice people. I met some Jews and they don't want to occupy anybody. They are very nice people.'"

Many Palestinians discovered, to their surprise, warmth and compassion in their Jewish counterparts.

Maysoon Said, the mother of four sons, said she had not expected to see Arabs and Jews working together in the peace movement as they do in the United States. "It's a different type of life," she said.

Amer Sweity of Jordan said he would like to see the camps widen to embrace people from Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Certainly, the camp is growing with each year. Last year, 90 attended. This year, participants filled every bunk and spilled over into tents.

"This is the fulfillment of a dream," Len Traubman said Friday night as he looked over a campfire crowd that included women in traditional Arabic dress, teens with tattoos and dreadlocks and children and adults in dusty shorts and baseball caps.

The camp, and the Living Room Dialogue, are a process that depends on compassionate listening, he said.

"I'm here to listen," said Elias Botto, a Living Room Dialogue regular. "I'm here to hear the other side of the story so my story will be complete."

What will an ultimate peace will look like?

According to Maysoon Said: "Like this camp."

Rebecca Rosen Lum covers religion. Reach her at 925-977-8506 or rrosenlum@cctimes.com .

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