

Jewish and Arab teens meet in leadership program

By JANICE ARNOLD, Staff Reporter **The Canadian Jewish News** Thursday, 27 January 2011



MONTREAL — Roy Hilzenrat took a photo of the treasured Star of David necklace, a bar mitzvah gift from his mother, that he has worn every day since he “became a man according to Judaism.”

Fatimah Rehman, left, of LaurenHill Academy and Jess Meirovici of Herzliah High School are among 16 Arab and Jewish students learning about each other through photography.

Mahmoud Abdel Gawad photographed an opened Qur’an with prayer beads laying on the page, explaining: “I think that Islam shouldn’t scare people. It’s beautiful and loves peace.”

Both of these teens’ black-and-white pictures are artistically rendered “self-portraits” intended to introduce themselves to each other.

Hilzenrat and Gawad, Grade 10 students at, respectively, Bialik High School and Ecole Jeunes Musulmans Canadiens (JMC), are among 16 Jewish and Arab youths participating in a new leadership training program called Living Together.

Thirty-two photos, two from each of them, were on display at an exhibit, which closed Jan. 25, at the Centre des loisirs de St. Laurent, the first public event of the program since it was launched in October.

Most did not have an overt religious or cultural theme, but were, rather, scenes from their homes, schools or neighbourhoods. Some were true self-portraits, often in playful modes.

The students, who come from five different schools and did not know their Jewish or Arab counterparts before, are meeting once a week at the centre until May. Each was given a camera for three weeks to record and share their daily lives, while learning the techniques of photography.

The goal is to give teens from communities that generally have little contact with each other here and whose peoples in the Middle East remain locked in conflict, the opportunity to get to know each other as individuals thereby “deconstructing stereotypes.”

Gradually, they have learned a little about each other’s culture. Religious discussion is mainly about holidays and practices, while politics is avoided for now.

Initiated by McGill University’s Montreal Consortium for Human Rights Advocacy Training [MCHRAT] and co-ordinated by photographer Amanda Tetrault, Living Together is sponsored by the borough and the local YMCA with grants from the Quebec government and City of Montreal.

It is guided by an advisory board of Jewish and Arab community leaders.

The other schools are Herzliah High School and the public schools Ecole secondaire St. Laurent and LaurenHill Academy. Only Bialik, located in Côte St. Luc, is outside St. Laurent.

The students have now turned their attention to working on a joint project, something that will leave a lasting impression in the very multicultural borough of St. Laurent. It’s up to the students to decide what it will be.

The two posters for the project are group photos. In each of them, the kids are hiding their faces: in one

behind three umbrellas with “Living together” in Hebrew, English, French and Arabic written on them, and, in the other, by holding mirrors to their faces, the reflective side outward.

The crowded opening of the exhibition, in the centre’s main foyer, was a congenial affair, an unusual mingling of Jewish and Arab Montrealers, some in kippot and others in hijabs.

The project has been in development for almost two years, said Laura Regev youth co-ordinator with Nesrine Saci. It took time to convince some schools and community leaders of the worthiness of the project.

“It was slow at the beginning – there was some hesitation. Some schools we had to go back a second time to speak,” Regev said. Finding Jewish participants was harder, simply because the Arab community is much larger in St. Laurent.

The students were chosen on the basis of their written submissions on why they wanted to take part.

Nevertheless, at the first meeting, there was a palpable nervousness, Regev said. “We used icebreakers, like humour and games, and soon they were talking to one another. Kids are kids, and the ones who applied are really motivated and curious. Every session I’m surprised just how motivated they are.”

Politics is not banned altogether, because Regev said the aim is to “stay in reality, while respecting others’ opinions.”

Photography has proved to be a good way of keeping the conversation among the young people. Between meetings, the students maintain a blog to share photos and thoughts.

“Whether they take any lesson from the project into the future, we can’t say for sure, but we have to try,” she said. In a video, a couple of students spoke of how they hope they can change society.

Hilzenrat, who came to Canada from Israel at age six, said that “the program is a great way for two cultures that don’t get together much to meet... We are seeing how our lives are similar, and different.

“Every community has its stereotypes... I had no expectations, so nothing has surprised me. It’s a learning experience.”

Herzliah’s Jess Meirovici said she signed up right away. “There’s never been anything like this before... I love it, I’m learning something new and meeting at a personal level is unbelievable.”

She knows Jews from Arab countries, but that’s as close as she came to knowing a person of Arab origin.

Meirovici applied to attend the Hebrew University of Jerusalem next year and believes this experience will be valuable.

JMC student Nabil Mamar hopes the program will set an example for others.

MCHRAT encompasses the Middle East Peace Program, which for more than a decade has been promoting peace between Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians. It’s now trying to foster that harmony closer to home.

St. Laurent borough mayor Alan De Sousa noted that it is almost seven years since the firebombing of the United Talmud Torahs in the community.

“If there is any hope for peace in the Middle East or more modestly right here, our leaders have to be inspired by this model... Coexistence is always fragile, we always have to work toward it. It does not happen by accident.”

Source: The Canadian Jewish News, Thursday, 27 January 2011.