

Using art to smooth jagged edge of conflict



Debbie Nathan is leading a local effort to spur dialogue among children of Israeli-Palestinian strife. (John Tlumacki/Globe Staff)

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By James Sullivan
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It's called a sociometric experiment. Thirty high school students preparing to travel to the North Shore for a summer arts program will begin their upcoming orientation by collaborating on a sculptural artwork.

Each student will be given the opportunity to place his or her contribution into a circle. If they want to touch another participant's work, they must ask permission. Where the kids choose to place their objects, say the organizers of Artsbridge, will reveal a lot about their perceived relationship to the group and their expectations for the program.

Given the makeup of the group, even this simple ice-breaking activity could be fraught with tension. Fifteen of the students are Israeli. The other 15 are Palestinian.

The purpose of Artsbridge, says founder Debbie Nathan, is to provide dialogue training through art therapy for children of the fierce Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nathan, a mother of three with 30 years of art therapy experience, is hoping to establish an annual summer camp devoted to the seemingly forgotten art of dialogue.

Though Nathan lived in Israel from 1976 to 1979, on a recent trip to interview candidates for the program she was struck by the depth of despair on both sides of the conflict.

"If you woke up tomorrow and the world was perfect," she asked every youth who applied for the program, "what would it look like?"

None of the children could begin to answer, she said this month at a daylong retreat for the Artsbridge board members at Nathan's house in Swampscott. She

is haunted by the shocked looks that came over the students' faces when she asked whether they could imagine peace in their lifetime.

"They hadn't even thought about it," she said.

It's not quite accurate to call Artsbridge a "peace camp," said board members Evan Longin and David Trimble, fellow psychologists who specialize in conflict resolution. The hope is simply that the students will take home a newfound appreciation for self-expression, reflection, and, above all, the ability to listen to others.

Beginning in late July, the students will spend three weeks in intensive workshops on the campus of Endicott College in Beverly. They'll take classes in film, sculpture, and painting, and they will be coached in discussions about their interaction.

The boys and girls of the inaugural program will then become mentors to other students back home. The goal, said Nathan, is to create a self-perpetuating network of aspiring leaders who can teach their peers to better understand their adversaries through art.

Over a lunch of orzo salad, tuna with cranberries, and hummus, the board members gathered around the island in the kitchen of Nathan's sunny home, greeting one another like old friends.

Some, in fact, are old friends. Lee Rosenvold recently retired from her job in international business development with New England Biolabs, where Nathan's husband, Peter, works. Greg Williams is general counsel for the same company. Longin is a codirector of the Salem Center for Therapy, Training and Research, where Debbie Nathan practices.

If their professional backgrounds have plenty of crossover, the board members represent a range of religious beliefs. Trimble, whose family line includes several generations of Methodist ministers, converted to Judaism in 2006. Another member, information technology recruiter Tarek El-Heneidy, is a naturalized United States citizen who left his native Egypt to study at the University of Rhode Island in 1960.

"I've been involved with peace movements for years," he said, taking a seat on a folding chair in the living room beside Nathan's 25-year-old son, David, who will serve as a camp counselor. "I met the [Artsbridge] team and fell in love with everyone."

"The feeling's mutual," declared Trimble from across the room.

After the plates were cleared, Nathan handed out a spreadsheet documenting the invitees' backgrounds.

Of the Palestinian students, seven are from the West Bank and four from East Jerusalem, with four more being Israeli-Arabs. Fifteen of the kids are Jewish, 10 Muslim, and five Christian; 11 are boys and 19 girls.

The balanced breakdown surpasses her most optimistic prediction, Nathan told the group. "I'm finding it rather miraculous," she said.

Looking at her thick stack of handouts, she noted that the budget had been mistakenly listed on the agenda twice.

"That sounds appropriate," joked Trimble.

Initially hoping to raise \$250,000 for the first year of the program (including the carryover when the students return to the Middle East), the Artsbridge organization has scaled back its goal to \$108,000 - a "bare-bones" figure, Nathan said.

"I encourage you to look very carefully at these figures," she said, before

reminding the board of a fund-raising party at a home in Weston.

Discussing an impending return to Israel, this time with Trimble for the students' orientation, she told the group how moving her interviewing trip had been.

One of the young women, she said, had recently moved out of the strife-torn Gaza Strip.

"But there are hundreds of thousands who don't have that possibility. The problems are so incredibly complex, it makes your head spin."

When she asked the prospective campers what they would ask for if they were granted three wishes, she recalled, almost all of them wished for health for their families and peace for their communities. She couldn't help but wonder how American students would respond.

"These kids' stories are so powerful to me," she said. ■