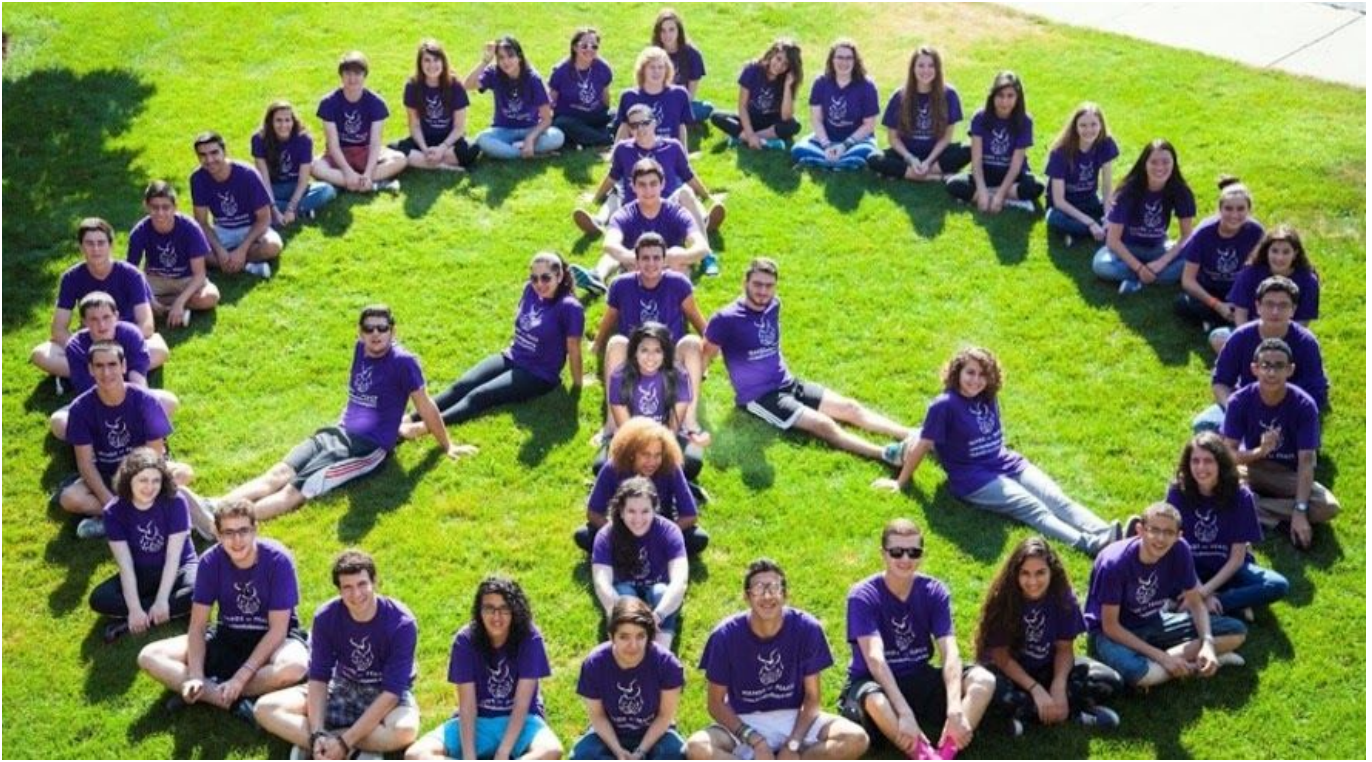


Far from fighting, Israeli and Palestinian teens talk



Israeli and Palestinian teens in the 2013 Hands of Peace program run by Glenview Community Church pose for a picture in the form of a peace sign. Ashley Bates/Hands of Peace

By Chicago Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff

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CHICAGO — Taher is a Palestinian teenager from the West Bank region of the Middle East. He has never met an Israeli before.

Palestinians are mostly Muslim. They are a nation of people with a government, but no country.

Shachar is an Israeli teen from Jerusalem. He has never spoken to a Palestinian, although they are neighbors.

The two 15-year-olds arrived in Chicago recently. They are taking part in a program that tries to build peace and understanding between the two peoples in the Middle East. The program is called Hands of Peace. It brings Israeli and Palestinian teens to the U.S. where they can talk freely about their lives and make friends, said Julie Kanak. She is in charge of Hands of Peace.

"Here I can see Israeli kids and talk to them and send them my message," said Taher. "I can tell them what I can't tell them back in the West Bank."

Two Sides Split Far Apart

"It's really impossible for them to meet ... back in their home territory," Kanak said. Kanak spoke of the wall that stands between Israel and the Palestinian areas. Other things keep them apart too. Israelis and Palestinians live in different cities. Their children go to different schools. There are few places they can even meet and get to know each other.

The Palestinians are seeking their own country. They and the Israelis have been negotiating — and fighting — over the land for decades. Neither side trusts the other. Most recently, Israel and the Hamas group that governs another Palestinian area called Gaza have been in a fierce fight.

Eleven years ago, the Glenview Community Church began Hands of Peace. Glenview is a town north of Chicago. More than 400 Middle Eastern teenagers have participated in the program. This is one of the first times the program has taken place when the two sides were actually fighting, said Roy Gordon. He works for the program.

"We were all really concerned," Gordon said. "We were wondering if there was going to be any problems with the young people being able to get out here."

So far, everything has gone well, Gordon said.

Meeting On Common Ground

Each morning the teens meet for two hours. They are encouraged to talk freely about their feelings, experiences, hopes and dreams.

"Most of these young people have never had a conversation with someone on the other side," Gordon said. "This is their first opportunity to do that. Pretty quickly they learn that they're all just teenagers." They have a lot in common, he said.

Earlier the group had a picnic at a park. It was followed by a game of softball. Many of the teens had never played softball before.

But softball was not the only "first" for some of the teens. This was the first time Taher met an Israeli. He said he wants to talk to them about being a Palestinian.

"I want to make change," he said. "And I want to have a voice to show to people what Palestine is and what we truly do, who are Palestinians and what we suffer."

The trip also marked the first time Shachar met a Palestinian.

Shachar said he wants to get to know the Palestinian teens better. He wants to learn what Palestinians really want and how they feel about what's going on back home. "It's so weird because we're here trying to get to know each other, and back home there's missiles," he said. "It's crazy."

Some people may think the program won't do any good. But Gordon said that the only other choice is to do nothing.

"Something has to be done, and this is what we chose to do. We're giving the (teens) an opportunity to learn something about the other side," he said.