

Parents Circle – Families Forum
Peace Summer Program
2021

The Project at A Glance

The Parents Circle's Peace Summer Program for bereaved Israeli and Palestinian youth fosters the message of reconciliation between Israeli and Palestinian youth. It offers a model of dialogue and co-existence between two "enemies". Sharing a week of intense discussions, team-building, and culinary training, the youth gain a deeper understanding about the daily lives of the 'other' and are immersed in the possibility of peace. This possibility is juxtaposed with the dominant narratives of their societies. The Summer Youth Program also has an impact on the youths' families, as mothers join their participants on the last day of the program and share in the unique experience of getting to know mothers and youth from the other side.

Program Objectives and Activities

The 2021 Summer Youth Program aimed to bring 30 Israeli and Palestinian youth (16-18) to attend a 5-day summer program. All the Palestinian youth were from bereaved families. Their status as bereaved allows them to participate in the program despite the immense social pressure in Palestine against participating in such programs, which are commonly perceived as "normalization". The 15 Israeli youth came from families both bereaved and non-bereaved.

In addition, the Summer Program engages the PCFF's Young Ambassadors for Peace (ages 18-25) young adult cohort to provide guidance and logistical support for the Summer Youth Program, gaining skills for peace leadership.

The Summer Youth Program was supervised by **Osama Abu Ayyash**, PCFF Co-Director. **Liat Bolzman** and **Aseel Jafari** served as the PCFF Summer Program Directors. Three professional translators joined the program to provide simultaneous translation for all activities.

PCFF partnered with Peace by Tourism, a non-profit organization, that promotes co-existence between young Jewish-Israelis, Palestinian-Israelis and Palestinians through their passion for cooking and hospitality. In collaboration with Institut Paul Bocuse, Peace by Tourism provides full scholarships to equip students with unparalleled skills and techniques in culinary arts, service and management. To give back to the community, the chefs led interactive culinary activities for the participants in the PCFF youth summer program. Five chefs participated in the 2021 PCFF Youth Summer Program.

Setting the Stage

The Youth Summer Program was set against a very challenging backdrop. First, the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic was a major issue. In 2020, we did not hold the Summer Program because of COVID-19. This year, we could not hold the camp in Israel since no permits were issued to participants of peace organizations since the outbreak of the pandemic. In addition, we raised the age of the participants to ensure that more participants were vaccinated. After much research and a number of scouting trips, the PCFF staff decided to hold the Youth Summer Program at the Biankini Beach at the Dead Sea located in Area C. This location was selected because in Area C Palestinian participants don't need permits.

In addition, tensions ran high because of the most recent outbreak of violence between Gaza and Israel in May 2021. And to exacerbate the tensions, the week before the Youth Summer Program was about to begin, an 11 year old boy, Mohammad al-Alami, from the town of Beit Ummar, was shot dead by Israeli soldiers in a car at the entrance of his hometown. A number of the participants and some of the Parents

Circle staff are from Beit Ummar and the near by area. Many participants were devastated by the event and some of them wanted to cancel their participation but Parents Circle staff spent hours speaking with the participants and their parents and were able to convince all the participants to attend. The participants brought with them their strong emotions which had to be unpacked during the week long session.

Activities

The first day of the program is very special and sensitive. For a “soft landing” we decided to get to know each other through games and fun activities. We also spent time on going over the general plans and guidelines for the week. Day 1 was dedicated to **coming together**, **meeting** and **seeing** each other:

We had our first joint activity to get to know each other as one big group using theatre games and non-violent communication (NVC) principles to set a common language of peace for the week. We followed this by a uni-national group activity.

In the uni-national groups we started to get to know each other more intimately. We shared why we were participating in the program. We continued to set clear expectations by sharing our wishes and fears for the Program.

After a long and hot day, we dove into the pool together played water games and cooled down from the heat.

In the evening we continued the team building by playing “finding the treasure” with mixed Israeli and Palestinian teams. One group won but everyone received hats and shirts for the rest of the camp.



Day 2 of the program was dedicated to **listening**. This was the first day we heard each other's personal stories. It was important to work on active listening skills in preparation for hearing each other's stories. We began by meeting in the uni-national groups where the youth engaged in guided practice of active listening and shared our personal stories as Israelis and Palestinians separately.

Then we came together to participate in the PCFF's Dialogue Meeting. We heard the personal stories of two bereaved members, one Israeli and one Palestinian, from the Parents Circle – Robi Damelin and Bassam Aramin.

This part was a challenging experience for us and raised many questions. The Palestinians found it challenging to fully understand Bassam's very strong message about a non-violent way when they are surrounded by violence and the Israelis grappled with the issue around their military service as Robi's son, David, was serving in the IDF reserves when he was killed and he really struggled with whether or not to go to the reserves. The Dialogue Meeting was followed by a processing session dedicated to talking about the difficult issues that were raised using the active listening and NVC methods we had learned earlier.

We knew the Dialogue Meeting and the processing session would be very intense for the participants, so our Young Ambassadors for Peace (bereaved young adults in training) led fun games for the group following.

Later we let the day sink in as we all floated in the Dead Sea. Day 2 ended in with a uni-national session that allowed both sides to have a safe space to share their emotions and thoughts that were raised during the encounter.



Day 3 was dedicated to **talking**, how to give space to others to talk, how to ask hard questions and more. The difficult conversations were accompanied by relaxing cooking sessions given by the chefs.

The participants started with a game called “excuse me for asking, but...” based on a famous television show. They asked each other the most difficult questions. This session brought up many of the core questions about the conflict. The Israelis asked the Palestinians what they thought they should do – go serve in the army and be as humanistic soldiers as possible or refuse to serve and go to jail. Palestinians asked Israelis why most Israelis don’t believe in peace and why those who believe in peace don’t work to help support peace.

It was perfect to hold this session while having rotations of the groups into the chefs’ session about preparing street food to lighten the atmosphere. The cooking session allowed the participants to cook together and by that acting and creating together.

Next they participated in a “spoken word” workshop led by one of the best Palestinian-Israeli bands, System Ali. They played theatre and sound games and wrote about their identity.

We took a trip to the a nearby river called Ein Fashha and swam in freshwater to decompress from the difficult conversations from the day. When we returned, the amazing chefs had cooked the delicious food we had prepared in the morning. It felt great to eat what we had prepared together.

We ended the day in the most fun way – a joint Karaoke event singing songs in Arabic and Hebrew and famous songs in English, discovering that singing definitely (and especially Adele) is able to bring us together. Not only was this fun but it helped us be more comfortable hearing the language of the other – something that often creates fear.

Day 4 was dedicated to **dreaming**. We allowed ourselves to envision possibilities that don’t currently exist. We imagined what a future could look like in the lands of Israel and Palestine that we wanted to see.

To start the process of looking towards the future, we explored a photography exhibit that our Young Ambassadors for Peace created in 2018 called “Hope4Change”. We looked at the photos and identified



photos that we connected with and formed small groups around that connection. In the small groups we talked about the photo and later we took photos of ourselves representing “hope”.

We continued the process with a workshop by an art therapist that connected us through guided meditation around the word “hope”. After the meditation, we painted and later created a charm of hope we took home with us. The material we used were all from nature. We worked quietly and with a lot of passion. In the end, we shared our art with each other. It was beautiful to see everyone’s interpretations – from reconnecting with family members that are in prison to getting hope from the sea.



In the afternoon we took our dreams into the kitchen with the chefs. We baked special sweets giving us a place to connect in a fun and relaxing way. We could talk casually and learn how to cooperate. The chefs also set an example for us about Israeli and Palestinian cooperation, seeing the natural connection between them and the Palestinian and Israeli chefs.

The day continued with a question. The counselors asked us what message we want to take from the camp back into our societies. This was a very deep process and was a peak of the dialogue work that we participated in the camp. We shared our personal messages and tried to find a common message between all of us. We used non-violent communication language of emotions and needs leading into a discussion that sees the ‘other’ and tries to find a common language. In the end small groups wrote their messages creating a big poster of strong and loud messages calling for Hope4change.

Even though it was hard to stop the conversation, it was time to cool off in the pool from the heat and excitement. We ended the day with a festive barbecue dinner with Arabic and Israeli



music and of course American music. We will especially remember the moments of *dabka* dancing together to the darbuka.



The last day was dedicated to: *what do I take from this camp into my daily life?* We started in a summarizing joint workshop – Israelis and Palestinians together. We examined the process we went through from the first day until the last day. We then continued the conclusions in uni-national groups, sharing our personal experiences from the week. We also gave attention to the new bonds we created and wrote messages to each other in notebooks.



The PCFF invited our mothers and families to come see and take part in the community of dialogue we created during the camp. At first, we had informal time over lunch then we decorated together the sweets we had baked the day prior. Israeli and Palestinian mothers and their children sat together, side-by-side decorating sweets and eating them together. The mothers learned about all the things we did during the week and the process we went through.



We finished with messages from the PCFF's co-Directors, bereaved sons, Yuval Rahamim and Osama Abu-Ayyash. We heard from the counselors, the chefs and the mothers. We shared a presentation we made about the camp including all of the activities and our hope for the future.

Until next year...

