

FILM CAMP

B.C. Mideast peace group gets boost from Spielberg

BY MATTHEW HAYS

This week, the Righteous Persons Foundation, a group based in Santa Monica, Calif., and founded by Spielberg in 1994 "to help support a flourishing and vibrant Jewish community," announced that it would make a \$25,000 donation to Peace It Together, a group that defines its mandate as "empowering youth to promote peace through dialogue and filmmaking."

Founded in 2003, Peace It Together has worked to bring Palestinian, Israeli and North American youth to summer camp, where they can learn more about each other and, in the process, break down stereotypes and barriers between the two sides in what most regard as the main Middle East conflict.

In 2004, Peace It Together held a camp attended by five Palestinian, five Israeli and two Canadian teens, who spent two weeks in Vancouver and rural British Columbia.

But in 2006, Peace It Together would come up with a new twist on the camp concept: It drew international attention when 29 Israeli, Palestinian and Canadian youths were brought together for a month, their goal being to make a series of short films on the idea of peace.

It proved to be a hit, culminating that summer with a sold-out screening in Vancouver attended by the city's mayor and the teen filmmakers themselves. The young filmmakers got a standing ovation and a review in The New York Times, among other places.

The obvious connection between cinema and philanthropy in the name of peace apparently caught the eye of Spielberg's foundation, which is funded by revenues generated by two of Spielberg's films, *Schindler's List* and *Munich*.

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Adri Hamael of
Peace It Together

Margery Tabankin, executive director of the Righteous Persons Foundation, says a grant to Peace It Together made perfect sense: "When Mr. Spielberg decided to funnel his profits from *Munich* into the Righteous Persons Foundation, he knew that he wanted to allocate these specific funds to programs based on co-existence issues," she said.

"As a filmmaker and producer of visual stories, he also resolved to take a close look at organizations harnessing various forms of media to stimulate discussion, dialogue and exchange. By specifically utilizing filmmaking to get Israeli, Palestinian and North American teens to engage in issues beyond their normal comfort zone, Peace It Together is a wonderful example of the power of film to deepen understanding and share narratives between cultures."

Peace It Together organizers said they were elated when they heard the news. "The fact that we got the attention of someone as accomplished and busy as Steven Spielberg tells me that we are doing something uniquely innovative and powerful," said Reena Lazar, who co-directs the organization with Adri Hamael.

"We are deeply moved and thrilled to receive this grant," Hamael added, "not only because we need the money to continue our important work, but also because of where it came from. We are very grateful to the Righteous Persons Foundation."

Lazar and Hamael confirmed that this summer will see another Peace It Together film camp, when close to 30 young people will be flown in from Israel, the Palestinian territories and across North America.

"We're trying to bring new thinking to an old conflict," Hamael said. "It was Einstein who once said, 'We can't solve today's problems with the same kind of thinking that created them.'"

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