

POSTED ON 19/08/06

## A West Coast, Mideast middle ground

At a remote Gulf Islands retreat, 30 teenagers from Israel, the Palestinian territories and Canada have spent the past two weeks hashing out their differences, while learning some hard-fought lessons. Photographer JOHN LEHMANN and reporter ALEXANDRA GILL chronicle a remarkable experiment in grassroots diplomacy

ALEXANDRA GILL

GALIANO ISLAND, B.C. -- When Hadeel Yassin arrived in Vancouver earlier this month, she was brimming with vim and vinegar. Although the young Palestinian woman had ostensibly come to Canada to talk about peace, love and understanding at a unique summer filmmaking camp called Peace it Together, she was clearly enthusiastic about the war that was then still raging in Lebanon and Israel.

"I think it's good for Palestinian people," said the 15-year-old, who comes from a family of refugees that had fled the Jewish state and now lives in the city of Nablus in the northern West Bank. "No one can stop Israel. They're still in our country. But now there is Hezbollah. Hezbollah can stop Israel."

Yassin's classmates, who had come from Israel, the Palestinian territories and across Canada to learn lessons in diplomacy through the art of filmmaking at a remote Gulf Islands retreat, were slightly unnerved by her hawkish attitude. "I was born there," cried Inbar Sofri, 17, a Jewish Israeli from Jerusalem, whose uncle had just fled the hostilities in Israel to seek refuge with her family. "It's my country too."

A Canadian in the group tried to steer this early conversation back to neutral ground. "Can we stick to sailing or something?" pleaded Gideon Scanlon, 15, from Toronto.

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The students hadn't even boarded the ferry to Galiano Island, where they have since spent the last two weeks at the Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS) hashing out their feelings and turning their hurts and hopes into seven short films that will be presented in Vancouver tomorrow night. "It's difficult to put any group of teenagers -- without any political or religious conflicts -- in one room and expect them to get along," says Adri Hamael, co-executive director of the Creative Peace Network, a Vancouver-based, multifaith charitable organization that held an earlier Peace It Together two years ago. "The escalation of violence in the Middle East certainly polarized the situation and made it more of a challenge this year." The 30 participants, all between 15 and 18, were selected by regional co-ordinators, in Canada and abroad, after the program was advertised in local newspapers, communities and schools. Applicants were required to speak English and have some sort of leadership experience, and an interest in filmmaking. Thanks to donations from individuals and private foundations, the students had to pay only \$450 each, which included their airfare.

The students all had their own reasons for signing up. Some from the Middle East wanted to learn what Canadians think about the situation in their homeland. Others were adamant that they were not here to promote peace but to present the needs of their people. A few saw filmmaking as a viable career option.

At the 2004 Peace It Together program, the focus was on conflict resolution and outdoor activity. This year, filmmaking was added to the mix after organizers were approached by GIFTS. "The marriage has been magical," says Reena Lazar, another co-executive director of the Creative Peace Network. "It's one thing to just dialogue issues, but when you actually have to create something together, you really have to resolve some of the issues."

The students broke into smaller groups to work on their choice of a dramatic, documentary or animated short film. After two weeks of heated discussions, outdoor team-building exercises and a crash course in the basics of scriptwriting, camera operation and editing, they seemed to have found lots of middle ground. Yassin, for one, didn't get to make the hard-line documentary she wanted, but midway through the program she accepts that compromise is sometimes necessary.

"You know how I said before that all Israelis should get out of Palestine?" she offered, after the others had scattered for lunch. "I still believe it, but maybe you shouldn't write that. Maybe you should write that, um, some time in the future, I hope my sons and daughters can go back. Yes, I think it's better that way."

*The students will present their films at a gala screening in Vancouver tomorrow night at the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, 2750 Granville St. For tickets: <http://www.ticketmaster.ca>, or call 604-280-4444 or the Arts Club Theatre Company box office at 604-687-1644.*

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