

## Camp helps Mideast girls dispel the 'enemy' myth

By Ana Maria Trujillo | The New Mexican

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Photo by: Sarah Welliver/The New Mexican

Khadrah Abu Zanat, a young Palestinian, remembers when Israeli soldiers blocked off sections of the road near her school and tanks began shooting into the building.

"Everybody was shouting, and they had the alarm on. Everybody was leaving ... and I went home by myself," Abu Zanat recalled tearfully.

Just 11 years old, she went from one house to another, trying to dodge bullets. "There were tanks and Jeeps and they were shooting kids," Abu Zanat said.

"When I finally came to home, my mother was waiting for me outside. She was crying, waiting for me and my brother to get home, and she hugged me, but when she hugged me, I didn't feel safe. It's hard not to feel safe in your mother's arms, and I still don't."

The first time Abu Zanat, now 18, told the story was in 2006 at a Glorieta-based camp, Creativity for Peace, she said.

According to its Web site, the organization holds a three-week summer leadership program that brings Palestinian and Israeli girls "out of the violence and conflict of their communities and into the safety of the New Mexico countryside."

Abu Zanat, a psychology major and peace activist, later became a "young leader" for Creativity for Peace, helping girls from Palestine and Israel try to love one another, despite being trained that the other is "the enemy."

"I fell in love with Creativity for Peace and its idea and what it's working toward," Abu Zanat said.

Learning to respect one another doesn't come naturally in this part of the world, she said. While the families of most of the teens support their decision to come to a camp with people "from the other side," many of their friends do not.

"Some of my friends tell me, 'Why? You're just going to waste your time,' " said Ayala Dangour, 18, a Jewish Israeli. "They say, 'They're not good people.' "

Creativity for Peace executive director Dottie Indyke said many of the girls come to camp with preconceptions that they find are wrong.

"Before I was a camper, I was not loving the other side," said Aya Basheer, 19, an Arab Israeli, "but when I participated in the camp, I changed all my thoughts and my feelings, so now I want to lead the other girls to share with them my experience with the other side."

Abu Zanat said she was afraid there would be an *intifada*, or war, at the camp. "We kind of know the other side as the enemy ... but eventually we became very good friends and very good sisters."

The girls made the decision to become program leaders because of their desire to help other young people in their situation.

"It's a very special camp and a very special atmosphere," Dangour said.

"We became so involved with (Creativity For Peace) and it became a big part of our lives, so it was so natural to go to the next stage and be more active and help others experience what we experienced," added Sapir Bar Yaar, 17, a Jewish Israeli.

"(Creativity For Peace) has touched me a lot because it's about just meeting and having fun; it's also about living with each other," said Feirooz Abadi, 20, an Arab Israeli who lives in Palestine. "In the same room, we are Jewish and Arabs together, and the whole day, we have to spend it together."

The all-girls camp was founded in 2003 by Rachel Kaufman on land in Glorieta that she and her husband, Rick Phillips, own.

Kaufman was having a conversation with a friend, artist Debra Sugarman, when the two wondered if the situation in Israel and Palestine would ever get better. They decided they were going to do something to change the deep-rooted feelings of distrust and hate by working with young people.

After camp is over, activities continue back at the girls' home, with special government permission. Some girls train to be peer leaders.

"We organize meetings where the girls have much the same thing that they do here: They have dialogue, they have art making and they have fun social time," Indyke said. "We believe that if we didn't continue that program in the Middle East year-round, our program wouldn't be successful."

The organization's 10th annual camp starts in August. By the end, 126 girls will have participated in

the program in New Mexico.

"There is an Arabic saying that goes, 'If you change a man, you change a man; if you change a woman, you change a nation,' " Indyke said. "Whether these girls end up being leaders in their countries or not, there's going to be a major ripple effect in their attitudes."

The campers and young leaders will be featured Tuesday at the Armory for the Arts, where there will be a screening of the documentary *Encounter Point* and a dialogue between the young women and the audience.

Zanat said she hopes one day there will be peace at home and she can hug her children and they will feel safe in her arms.

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## IF YOU GO

What: Creativity for Peace hosts a screening of *Encounter Point* and a dialogue with young women from Israel and Palestine.

When: 6 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Armory for the Arts, 1050 Old Pecos Trail

Cost: \$15