Seeds of Peace

Every year since 1993 an organization called Seeds of Peace has brought together Israeli and Palestinian teenagers for a three-week summer camp on the shores of Pleasant Lake in Maine. Over the years, more than 3,000 Israeli and Palestinian teenagers have attended the Seeds of Peace camp. They bunk together, play games together, hike together, go boating and swimming together, battle the Maine mosquitos together—and every day they engage in daily sessions to talk about the conflict between their groups and share their experiences. Surveys at the end of camp show the teenagers are feeling more positive about each other.

Follow-up surveys done one year later indicate the participants’ attitudes do regress somewhat. Not enough, however, to eliminate a positive effect. The campers still feel more positive toward the other group than they did before the camp. Perhaps the most striking finding is that campers who formed at least one close relationship with someone from the other group were the ones who sustained the most positive attitudes toward the other group.

In the Middle East today, graduates from the Seeds of Peace camp are leading local peace-building and educational nonprofits, starting regional renewable energy companies, and training youth in social entrepreneurship. They are also advocating for constitutional and legislative reform in their countries.

In addition, Seeds of Peace has adapted its conflict resolution and youth leadership program to launch a domestic project in Maine schools focused on reducing racial and ethnic conflict among students. Historically, Maine has been the nation’s “whitest” states, but now it is becoming more diversified, with a growing number of refugees and asylum seekers from Africa and Asia.

The conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians runs so deep and is so bitter, it’s hard to conceive of a way of improving relations between the two peoples. The situation seems hopeless. But Seeds of Peace has proven otherwise, and in so doing, it has kept hope alive.