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Peace camp aims to help Israel, Palestinian teen girls understand each other

By Claudia L. Silva csilva@sfnewmexican.com Aug 3, 2022 Updated Aug 4, 2022 2



Lihli Naim of Herzliya, Israel, laughs as Eden Vaknin of Tibearis, Israel, feeds her a bite of cantaloupe July 22 while preparing snacks for the participants in Tomorrow's Women peace camp held in Galisteo for teen girls from Israel and the Palestinian territories. Naim and Vaknin helped out this year as senior young leaders after previously attending the workshops. Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

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If You Go

What: A celebration of peace with Tomorrow's Women, a camp that brings Israeli and Palestinian teen girls to Galisteo to learn how to foster peace.

When: From 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday.

Where: Farmers Market Pavilion, 1607 Paseo de Peralta.

Tickets: Adult tickets are \$25 and students tickets are \$10. Children 10 and under get in free.

GALISTEO — Four young women chatted and laughed as they prepared afternoon snacks for 13 teens — girls from Israel and the Palestinian territories who had gathered at a camp thousands of miles from their conflict-stricken homelands.

The women are former campers who returned to Galisteo to serve as mentors at the Tomorrow's Women peace camp — formerly known as Creativity for Peace — and help the younger first-timers learn to better understand themselves and other girls they might have once viewed as enemies.

For nearly two decades, the nonprofit has held the summer camp south of Santa Fe for Israeli and Palestinian teen girls who hope to foster peace.

"I really wanted to come here to be a big sister for the campers," said 20-year-old Eden Vaknin, who attended the camp in 2017. "They're the main part of this project, so it's really important for me to support them, to be like a role model for them and to share my experience and how much it affected me as a camper."

Vaknin grew up in Israel and now lives in Portugal. She said the camp "actually changed me so much because when you come here, it's like you see humans, you see their soul, you really feel their fears."

The campers will get a chance to meet with the community Thursday during a Celebration of Peace at the Farmers Market Pavilion in the Santa Fe Railyard. They will share stories about their lives and how the camp has affected them.

This is the first summer the camp has opened in Galisteo after a two-year hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic. The camp closed in 2020 but a version was held in the West Bank in 2021, where many staff members live.

"It's really remarkable that COVID didn't end this important work and that we are able to persevere through it," said Alana Grimstad, a spokeswoman for Tomorrow's Women.



Nader Younis of Nazareth, Israel, cuts pineapple July 22 for a fruit tray for the participants in the Tomorrow's Women peace camp. The event brings together teen girls in Galisteo from Israel and the Palestinian territories. Younis participated in the camp years ago and assisted as a senior young leader. Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

The teen campers will return home at the end of the week, she said, but their work with Tomorrow's Women won't be over. They will continue to participate in peace advocacy workshops.

The four mentors — Vaknin; fellow Israeli Lihli Naim, 21; Nada Younis, an 18-year-old Palestinian who lives in Israel; and 20-year-old Dyala, who lives in the West Bank — described disparities they experienced during the pandemic. Those living in Israel, a leader in vaccination research with one of the highest COVID-19 vaccination rates in the world, had prompt access to vaccines, they said. Dyala, who asked that her last name not be published to protect her safety, spoke of struggles in the West Bank to access vaccines.

With tears in her eyes, Dyala recounted how her brother died from COVID-19 just a few months before vaccines became available.

She said her father died before she was born; she believes he was killed during an Israeli military raid in the family's neighborhood.

The young women have been exposed to violence across borders.

Naim described going to an underground shelter with her single mother as bombs were dropped over Tel Aviv when she was 14.

"In that moment, I understood that I don't want my life to be like that," she said. "I don't want to go down to a safe place, I want to feel safe in every place in my country."

She came to the peace camp a year later.

"In that camp, I learned about the other side," Naim said.

She became a social worker for the Israeli Air Force, she said, but has become conflicted about the actions of her nation's military after returning to the camp and listening to stories shared by fellow mentors and young campers.

"So, I'm a bit confused," Naim said.

Younis, who grew up in Nazareth, said there weren't many Jewish people in her city and she didn't realize there was a conflict in her country until she began competing as a gymnast.

"I used to train with Jews [in Nazareth], and they never treated me in a different way," she said. But when she began competing in other parts of the country, she experienced discrimination because she is an Arab Muslim.

"They just take distance, and they just don't talk to me; they talk to my other Jewish friends," Younis said.

As she learned about the conflict and how Palestinians have been affected in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Younis said, it became harder for her to understand why "the government doesn't look at everyone the same way and doesn't give everyone the rights they deserve."

"When I learned that this was happening, I was like, 'Something's wrong here and we have to fix it.'"

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Claudia Silva

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