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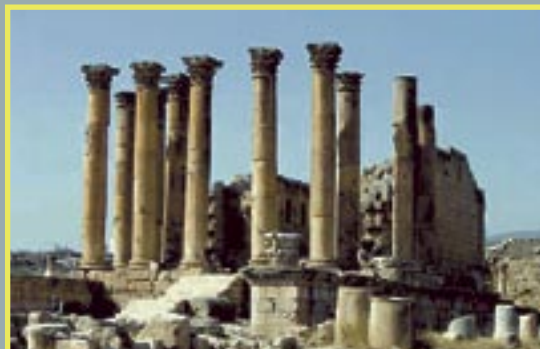
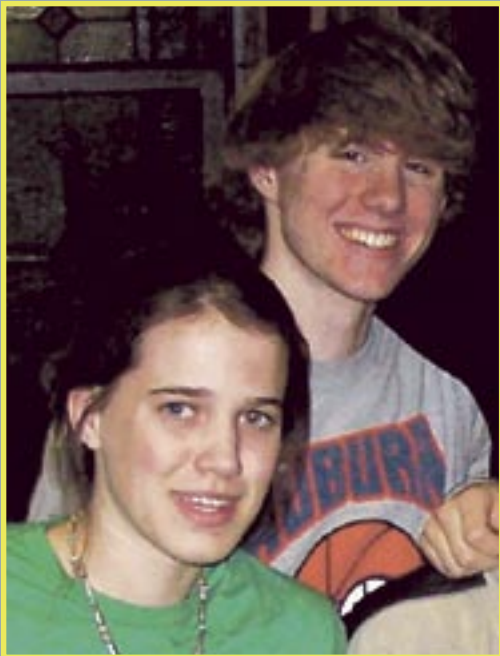
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## Teen harmony

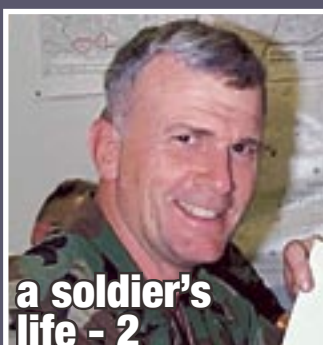
Peace, technology, and understanding in the Middle East

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# Teen harmony

## Peace, technology, and understanding in the Middle East

By Shay Totten

*Vermont Guardian*

Two decades ago, the perceived foe of the United States and the free world was the Soviet Union, otherwise known as the Evil Empire.

During the 1980s, it was the media that helped to shape the images U.S. citizens had of our perceived nemesis, the Red Tide. They were shown as brutish thugs who would stop at nothing to ensure that their particular brand of communism would overtake the world; cold, detached from being human, artless, and spiritually devoid.

During that time, a small group of people decided that one way to bridge the cultural divide, and bring about change and understanding, was through one-on-one contact and collaboration through the arts. At the time, there was heightened tension between the United States and the former Soviet Union, with many believing that a nuclear war between the two superpowers was inevitable.

However, four years after the first delegation of Project Harmony made its way behind the Iron Curtain, the curtain collapsed. The era of détente arrived.

“At the time, we used the message of the performing arts to develop these one-on-one relationships and those relationships grew and changed as the world changed,” said Kathy Cadwell, one of Project Harmony’s founders, and a participant on the first trip 21 years ago to Leningrad in the former Soviet Union. “We like to think that we helped to play a role in that change in some way.”

Today’s global geopolitical tensions are no longer focused on the former Soviet Union, but rather on China and the Middle East, on one hand due to economics and on the other hand due to a mix of politics and policy.

After more than two decades of fostering mutual understanding between citizens of the United States and countries of the former Soviet Union, to improve U.S. relations with and understanding of people in the Middle East, Project Harmony is now partnering with the United Palestinian Appeal, which provides humanitarian relief to the needy.

Cadwell will be joined on this new adventure with 10 Vermont students from around the state. The group departs for Amman,

Jordan, on Sunday and returns April 29. In July, 10 Jordanian students and their faculty will come to Vermont.

The Media Education and Democracy in Action (MEDIA) Youth Leadership Exchange Program represents Project Harmony’s first program in the region. The program enables Project Harmony to bring its unique blend of Internet technology, cross-cultural learning, and civic engagement to the Middle East. MEDIA is a program of the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs under its Linking Individuals, Knowledge, and Culture initiative.

“I feel the exact sense of excitement and risk-taking and sense of adventure today as I did on the first trip in 1985,” said Cadwell. “These kids have an intense desire and make these personal connections, and to do it in a time when there is a lot of misunderstanding going on. And, we now have the ability in the organization to deliver . . . [W]e have an infrastructure and we are building on things that we’ve learned and taking a similar message to a different area of the world to meet new challenges.”

When Project Harmony started, Cadwell notes, many skeptics said the group would never succeed. She’s glad to have proven the critics wrong, and to be able to put the organization’s talents to work in the Middle East. Back then, the group was three people with a vision. Today, the organization has 100 employees and seven offices around the world.

“We are now able to combine what we know about face-to-face intercultural communication and utilize new developments in technology as a way to meet each other,” said Cadwell.

Students, though they have yet to meet face-to-face, have already been fast at work in pairs on research projects, which they will complete, and present, when the Jordanian students come to Vermont.

The group is not only using technology to engage the students, but to share the experience with people back home. One of the project’s participants, and media professionals, Champlain College professor Rob Williams, created a video log, or vlog, for relatives and others to see firsthand what the students are experiencing. Each day, Williams will

interview a student and then upload the video.

The 10 student pairs are now working on assignments, focusing on working a topic they feel passionate about and creating a digital story, said Renee Berrian, Project Harmony’s program manager. While in Jordan the students will take pictures and conduct additional research. When Jordanians come to Vermont in July the pairs will make final edits to their production and make a public presentation. The projects will also be posted on the Internet, she added.

Later, the students will go back to their communities and present their project at either their school or some other setting, Berrian said.

### Crossing the divide

The students taking part in the Project Harmony trip were picked for their interest in media, and media literacy, as well as their thirst to meet and learn from peers in different countries. In preparation for the trip, the Vermont students took Arabic lessons for two months, Berrian said, and also met with others who have traveled to the region, to give them a primer on cultural dos and don’ts.

Students in Vermont and Jordan know there is more to understanding each other’s cultures than what they read in brochures or see on television or in movies.

In the United States and the Middle East, media plays a dominant role in the lives of young people, shaping their views of themselves and the world around them. The proliferation of the Internet, satellite TV, and global product brands have allowed media images and messages to penetrate nearly all facets of youths’ lives.

Teaching young people to be smart information consumers is important to building vibrant and healthy societies, and is key to Project Harmony’s work.

In an e-mail exchange with student participants, the *Vermont Guardian* learned that teens in Jordan and Vermont were acutely aware of the media’s role in shaping their worldview of each other’s culture.

“Media creates the impressions we have about people, especially from different countries. For instance, people in the U.S. and Europe have a wrong idea about Arabs and Muslims. This whole image was created through media,”

wrote Mira Yaseen, who attends Al Ahliyyah School for Girls.

Yaseen hopes the personal connection she makes with peers will allow her to give her peers “the right idea about us and make them see us as we are not as the violent media has shown us. In their trip to Jordan, they will create a different image of us; they will understand our lifestyles, our principles and culture.”

Yaseen’s Vermont counterpart, Taylor Dobbs, who attends Montpelier High School, agrees and believes that there needs to be conscious effort to counter the impact of the media on cultural impressions.

“I would say I would like to try to figure out a way to balance all of the biased media in the world into sort of one central source. To let all views be heard is a very difficult task, but I don’t think it’s possible to have a totally neutral form of media, so the only way to make media neutral is to get input from both sides,” wrote Dobbs.

Dobbs does expect the group’s real-life experiences in the Middle East to be much different than what is portrayed in the media.

“Currently all we are seeing on the news is bodies, riots, and people running around with AK-47s,” Dobbs added. “A big reason I want to go on this trip was to alter the common misconception of myself and others that everyone in the Middle East is like that.”

Janet Janbek, who attends Prince Hamzeh School in Jordan, hopes to not only represent her culture, but to learn more about her peers in the United States.

“I hope to see how other people live, I like discovering new things and learning about different cultures, so I think this exchange would be very beneficial for both of us. I think that I would maybe become more open minded and a lot more understanding which would of course affect every side of my life,” Janbek wrote. “And I hope I can present my culture in its right portrait. I also hope to show others that our religion is not how some say it is.”

Often the media’s portrait distorts reality, she added, something starkly clear “when we look at the way others think of us and our religion. In my opinion, that picture created by the media can sometimes mislead a person and hold him back from learning new things,” she added.

There is perhaps no age group

more targeted by the media than teens, and these 20 students are acutely aware of it, perhaps even more than how the media distorts their cultural traits.

“As far as being a teenager — I would say that media plays a huge role in my life. Although I only watch TV every couple of nights for an hour or so, I am constantly encountering it through magazines, store advertising, school studies, etc. I definitely believe that the media has affected how I view Jordanians or other people from the Middle East,” said Catherine Moore of Harwood Union High School. “Despite my ideas of keeping an ‘open mind.’ I realize after only briefly talking to the Jordanian students in this exchange that I have created a false stereotype which is unfair to the Jordanians. I believe that they have found this truth to be equally correct from their end of the exchange.”

While many of the students found out about Project Harmony through their schools, teachers, or a visiting talk by one of the group’s members, the family of Uli Botzjorns, of Mount Mansfield Union High School, has hosted people from several former Soviet Union countries through previous exchange programs.

“I think that media often gives a stereotypical image of people from other countries, especially the Middle East, because of America’s relation with them and I would like to attempt to bring about more understanding between these countries,” said Botzjorns.

Finally, there is Ahmad Al-Ali, a Palestinian refugee living in Jordan and attending Al Hussein College.

“I would like to show the American team our daily life and introduce them to the Jordanian customs and traditions,” wrote Al-Ali. “Also, I want to correct the ideas that people have about Islam. I’m sure the American media do not show the complete picture about what’s happening in the world and as far as I know a lot of Americans think that all Muslims are terrorists and evil. Also I want to explain the Palestinian issue from our point of view.”

Al-Ali hopes to learn more about U.S. culture and society, most of which he has learned from various forms of media, in person saying, “It’s fantastic to meet people from other cultures and religions.”