

CULTURE

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Breaking down stereotypes f2f

By Rob Williams and Kathy Cadwell

Editor's note: Kathy helped found Project Harmony in 1985, with the goal of building cross-cultural relationships and breaking down barriers between Soviets and people in the United States. Rob helped found the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME) in 2001. The pair accompanied 10 Vermont students and four staff to Amman for a journey of discovery and learning. This is their account.

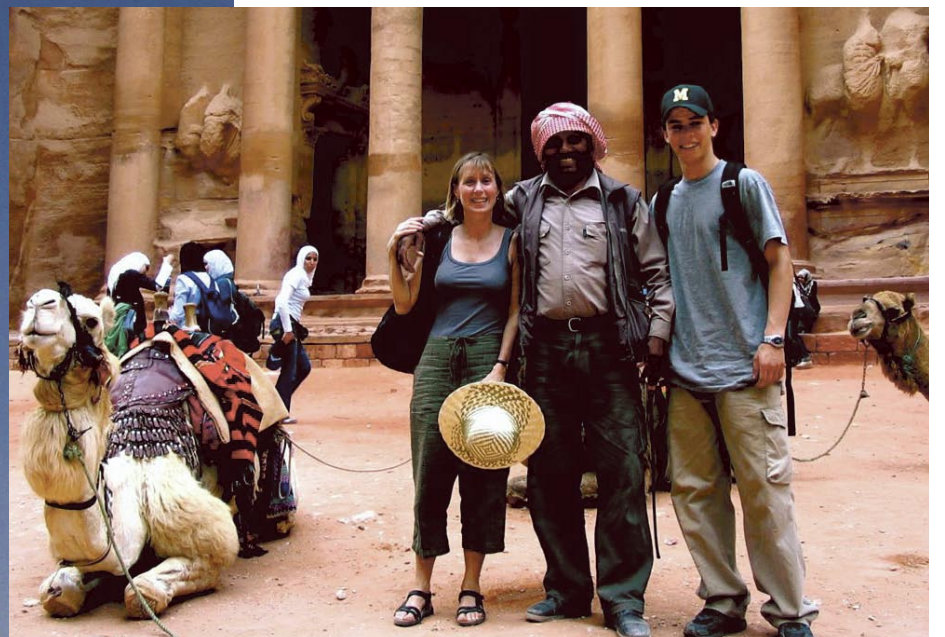
Are all Arabs "terrorists?" Is everyone in the United States "fat and stupid?" Are these two stereotypes true?

Vermont and Jordanian high school students explored these and other media related questions during an exchange program in Amman, Jordan, in April.

This program, funded by the U.S. Department of State's Educational & Cultural Affairs Office, and conducted under the auspices of Project Harmony in Waitsfield, brought Vermont teenagers to Jordan where they lived with host families. On June 20, the Jordanians will travel to Vermont for a three-week reciprocal visit. They will live with families and complete media projects with their Vermont counterparts. Before ending their visit to the United States on July 10, they will visit western Massachusetts and Washington, DC.

The Media Education and Democracy in Action (MEDIA) Program is the first Project Harmony initiative to establish cross-cultural ties between the United States and the Middle East. It is also brought the first group of Vermont teenagers to travel and live in Jordan for three weeks. It brings together a range of organizational partners and synthesizes a variety of time-tested educational approaches. As the two MEDIA program teachers, we share an avid interest in global history, a hands-on approach to pedagogy and leadership development, and the power of one-on-

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Clockwise from top: Lizzy, Emily, Eman, Katarina, Mira, and Hannah celebrating digital story-telling; Renee and Taylor with Gasin, the Petra Ruins camel jockey; Arabic Pepsi can at Jaresh's 2,000-year-old Roman ruins outside Amman
photos by Rob Williams

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one interaction to improve mutual understanding.

In designing the MEDIA Program, we laid out a variety of goals. Pedagogically, we wanted our students to explore contemporary global issues, first through ongoing online learning discussions via web forums, and then through F2F (face to face) communication and project-based work. Our online conversations began in early January, with Vermont and Jordanian high school students introducing themselves to one another in our web forum. The teens talked on line about their media interests and their concern about global issues, such as poverty, women's rights, racism, and media ownership.



Emily and Ahmad meet with science students at an all-girls school in Amman.
photo by Rob Williams

During the winter months, our students used the web forum to push each other to consider media-related contemporary issues more closely. We asked the question, "Was it right of some Danish newspapers to publish provocative cartoons poking fun at Islam?"

In our Amman F2F conversations, we probed the positive and negative aspects of our 21st-century media culture in depth. We looked at the ways in which the brain processes different kinds of information, how advertisers and other powerful media makers "construct" media "realities" using sophisticated production techniques, and how news outlets report on the events of the day.

After watching Egyptian-American filmmaker Jehane Noujaim's 2004 documentary film *Control Room*, which scrutinizes Al Jazeera television's coverage of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, we discussed questions of "objectivity" in journalism. We then took our questions to Jordanian newspaper editors at the Arabic language daily *Al Ghad* and the English language weekly *The Star*, both with offices in downtown Amman. Their revelations about the nature of "objectivity" in

the newsroom reminded us that the process of news reporting involves an ongoing dialogue with a story as it unfolds from day to day.

Other highlights of the MEDIA trip included seeing real newspapers in action, watching news broadcasts with a critical eye, and talking with news producers about the difficulties and rewards of making news reports happen in a fast-moving multimedia world.

A second goal of our MEDIA Program was to provide students with the necessary steps to produce their own multimedia stories. Short, personal, and provocative digital stories are designed to personalize a global issue and propose solutions to the common problems that plague us.

Our online conversations and F2F work in Amman saw our students brainstorming, scripting, and storyboarding their own digital stories that focused on issues they felt passionate about.

We plan to work with the students to strengthen their leadership and presentation skills and prepare them to present their stories to audiences in their home communities.

A third goal of the MEDIA Program involves the breaking down of cultural stereotypes, often media-created. Hannah McMeekin, from Sharon, and Eman Al-Araj, who attends The Al Ahliyyah School for Girls in Amman, are working on a digital story about cultural stereotypes.

"When I told my friends I was traveling to Amman, many of them thought I was crazy," McMeekin said. "But after spending several late nights walking through busy city streets with my Jordanian friends, I learned that Amman is much safer than many American cities."

Al-Araj added, "In meeting the Vermonters, I learned that American high students are like Jordanians teens in many ways. But I was really surprised by how inter-

ested our Vermont friends were in learning about Jordanian history and culture."

Another objective of the MEDIA Program goal was to study the history and culture of each country. Our Vermonters spent several days on the ground in Amman visiting schools, non-governmental organizations, news outlets, cultural centers, and the United Nations Relief & Works Agency. We spent an emotional morning at the Baqa Palestinian Refugee Camp, a settlement of 120,000 people outside of Amman where we visited a school for disabled students and a health clinic.

We also traveled to other regions of Jordan, rode camels in the ancient cliff civilization of Petra and traveled in jeeps across patches of desert in the Wadi Rum natural preserve. We hiked amongst the spectacular Roman ruins at Jerash and floated in the Dead Sea — the lowest point on Earth and steeped in biblical history. These experiences, along with the evenings spent with our host families discussing all manner of topics, enhanced our understanding of Jordan's history, tradition, and culture.

As a final program goal, we sought to harness the promise of new 21st-century media. Much attention is being paid, and rightly so, to the problem of corporate media ownership and its attendant perils. But our 21st-century media technologies — with blogs, low power FM radio, digital video, pod-casting, wikis (collectively created online resources), etc. — offer all of us, as global citizens, the promise of democratizing and distributing information around the world. Using digital cameras and one mini-DV recorder, we captured the sights and sounds of our work in and travels throughout Jordan, and then posted them at our MEDIA "vlog" (a video web log). This allowed friends, family, and colleagues to keep track of our learning as it unfolded.

Our hope is to use the lessons learned from our pilot MEDIA Program to continue to build relationships with Middle Eastern partners so we can offer future cross-cultural MEDIA programs for students of all ages. This remarkable experience combined a bewildering mixture of culture, education, history, leadership, and multimedia skills.

"None of us is as smart as all of us," is a Project Harmony adage. Our MEDIA trip to Jordan proved a constant reminder of this simple truth, and will no doubt continue to prove true in our weeks of work and learning that lie ahead. ☺

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