

Connecting teens to build peace

by [Christa Case Bryant](#) in the [April 15, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Seeds of Peace, which has become one of the Middle East's most recognized peace-building initiatives, is seeking to expand its reach.

The organization sees the maturing graduates of its camp program—more than 5,000 individuals—as an important resource to be tapped as it refines its goals. More than half of these graduates are moving into leadership roles in their respective fields.

The organization now hopes to empower them to transform a wide variety of sectors in conflict areas—from women's rights to technological innovation. Such progress, say Seeds of Peace officials, is a crucial prerequisite to any comprehensive, sustainable peace.

"It's not about signing a piece of paper," said Eva Armour, head of programming for the New York-based organization. "The question is, do we have leaders who are working to advance political, economic, and social change in ways that contribute to peace building? What's brilliant is there's actually lots of them."

Attendees at a first-of-its-kind conference in Jordan in February, dubbed GATHER, ranged from Afghan deputy parliamentary speaker Fawzia Koofi to Palestinian computer engineer Hani El-Ser to Israeli activist Lior Finkel-Perl. The primary sponsors were two U.S.-based foundations, Pershing Square and Ashoka.

The event launched a new stage in the work of Seeds of Peace, bringing together for the first time adult alumni from both the Israeli-Arab conflict and from India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In addition, it reached out to like-minded folks working for social change; about 40 percent of GATHER participants had no prior connection to the organization.

"We were more like a club before," said Daniel Noah Moses, director of Seeds of Peace educator programs in the Middle East, South Asia, and the United States. "The organization sees that . . . if we really want to make the change we say we want to make, we have to widen our reach."

The inaugural Seeds of Peace summer camp for Israeli and Palestinian teens took place in the state of Maine in 1993. Participants were invited to the White House to witness the signing of the Oslo Accords that September between Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Seeds of Peace rode that momentum of hope for years. But like myriad other peace-building initiatives that sprang up post-Oslo, the organization faced a backlash of cynicism when the second intifada broke out in 2000.

One of the first victims of the intifada was 17-year-old Asel Asleh, an Arab citizen of Israel and one of the organization's most enthusiastic alumni, who was killed by an Israeli policeman on the sidelines of a protest. He died wearing his Seeds of Peace T-shirt.

"Some people say, 'Look at all he was trying to do, and he was still killed, so this is worthless,'" said Ned Lazarus, Middle East program director from 1996 to 2004. "Others look at what he said and did, what he stood for in his life. He wrote some amazing things for 16-17 years old."

Among them was a letter in which Asleh intoned a friend's words: "Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

This past fall, one of Asleh's Jewish Israeli bunkmates, Tomer Perry, brought his wife—pregnant with their first child—to see the camp for the first time. Under the brilliant red foliage, they found the cabin where Asleh's name was still inscribed over his bed. They chose Asel as the middle name for their newborn son.

"Seeds of Peace has had a profound influence on my life in a variety of ways, and Asel was part of it," said Perry, a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Stanford.

For many, the initial enthusiasm of camp fades as they go back to work or their studies. But a University of Chicago study published in the fall found that Seeds participants who made just one lasting friend at camp retained a more positive view of the "other."

Lazarus, who researched the long-term impact of Seeds of Peace for his Ph.D., found that more than 140 graduates—or about one in five—were working in various peace-building initiatives as adults, eight to ten years after their summers at camp and despite living through the intifada, which killed more than 4,300 Israelis and

Palestinians.

“Do you want to call that success or not? It’s up to you,” he said. “To take on this identity of someone working for peace is to decide to have arguments with your society every day of your life. It takes tremendous energy and commitment.”

Indeed, such individuals are in a minority. In Israel, for example, support for a two-state solution hit a record low this fall after the Gaza war, and leftists and peace activists have been marginalized—but not deterred.

“It’s not that I’m naive,” said Finkel-Perl, executive director at the Peace NGO Forum. “I encounter the challenges and the risks of working together every day.”

She attended the Seeds camp in 1996 shortly after Prime Minister Rabin’s assassination by a right-wing Israeli. She answered cynics of peace building with a question of her own: “What is the alternative?”