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UNITY PROJECT: Young Arabs, Jews take rigorous journey to goals

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Ten teenagers, five Jewish and five Arab, will embark on a wildlife expedition together in August through the North Carolina mountains. It isn't the typical outward-bound program or a reality TV show. It is the new Palestinian-Israeli Unity Project that strives to create positive relationships between the two conflicting peoples through a common, rigorous outdoor experience.

The P-I Unity Project is the product of a partnership between the North Carolina Outward Bound School and the "Breaking the Ice" project. In last year's BTI program, four Palestinians and four Israelis embarked on a 30-day expedition from Chile to Antarctica. The Unity Project aims to set up a similar experience for the Israeli teenagers, including a visit to Atlanta on Aug 25.

Ann Baruch, the development director and a board member of the Outward Bound School, said the unity program helps students "be agents of social change in their communities, to help build bridges instead of build fences."

Teamwork, self-reliance

The expedition will last for 15 days in early August. The participants will work together on a high ropes course, rock climbing, backpacking, and Service projects that stress teamwork and self-reliance. Each Student also will have to do a solo course to reflect on the trip.

"Everyone in the group is supplied the same gear to use, the same food to eat and the same weather conditions to endure," said Olfat Haider, a project participant and instructor in the program. "They will return to Israel with the message: 'We need each other and we can live together in harmony.'"

All of the 15-to 17-year-old participants come from Haifa, Israel's third largest city. It is an area that includes people of Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Baha'i and other faiths. The city was critically contested in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

"Haifa gives you so much hope," said Peter Bauman, the outward-bound school instructor who founded the program. "Because this is a city that is doing it. They are co-existing. And it's not even intentional. They're working together. They're living together."

Two school instructors and two members of the BTI expedition in 2004 will accompany the participants as their guides. They will also initiate discussions with the hope of breaking down stereotypes between the two groups

After the wilderness component of the program, the participants in the project will spend five days traveling to cities across the Southeast, including Atlanta on Aug. 25, to share their experiences. Other stops would include Greenville, S.C.; Charlotte and Asheville, NC.

Bauman said he has gotten positive responses from past American participants of the Unity programs.

"It is inspiring. I have students already from the Unity courses that are interested in making friends from the Palestinian-Israeli course. And students from this course have already told me they're interested in meeting kids in the States," he said.

Organizers hope the participants will return home with a new cross-cultural acceptance and emphasis on peace that they can spread to Haifa and the Middle East overall.

They will continue to meet twice a month to work on service projects, outdoor

activities with other students, and discuss peaceful resolutions to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

"Rather than pulling students from all across the country, we were looking for a group that was close to one another geographically so after this experience, when they go home, they will continue to build upon this wilderness experience," said Erin Leonard, the director of sales and marketing at North Carolina Outward Bound School.

Israel recruitment

Two BTI representatives visited Haifa schools to recruit Israel teens for the program. They chose the 10 participants based on their leadership qualities, physical capability and most importantly, their desire to make difference when they returned home. As an orientation, they went on a three-day expedition through the Ngab Desert in Israel.

The students will not have to pay for their airfare or to participate in the program since interested foundations and other donors finance it.

The school and the Breaking the ice project decided to work together on the project when they recognized their common cause.

"We really realized that there was a similarity in our mission," said Leonard. "We thought we could probably use our expertise in working with young people and provide a similar program for youth from Israel."

In 2006, the school hopes to organize three similar student expeditions from other cities in Israel. Future programs will be tailored to the successful parts of this year's pilot.

For more information, go to www.ncobs.org or www.breakingtheice.org.

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