Dear Friends,

Things are steadily progressing at AV as the "new year" quickly transitions into "this year." As we begin to sort through the number of applications we received from across the country for our Vision Program, we have just opened up applications for high school students in the San Francisco Bay Area interested in applying to our first ever Unity Program in the Bay!

Alongside preparations for these new programs next year, we are also deeply engaged with our current students participating in the Unity and Vision Programs. Next month marks the official end of our 2007 Vision Program whereas our Unity Program students and educators are back in full swing after their winter break.

To help with our continuing programs and the other exciting developments we are working on, we are joined by a new member of the team. So please read on and help spread the word.

As always, thank you for all of your support.

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AV Participates in the Committee on Teaching at the UN Conference

As mentioned in last month's newsletter, AV participated in an important conference on February 1, 2008 at the Committee on Teaching about the UN conference, (CTAUN) entitled "Teaching and Learning in an Interdependent World". One of our All-Star Heschel Unity Program students, Adina Marx-Arpadi joined our Director of Unity Programs, Houda Abadi, to represent Abraham's Vision in the Information Fair exhibit table. Adina spoke about her experiences as a Unity program student and why she feels this program was, and remains so important to her. We were also fortunate to have two of our Vision Program graduates Shira Danan and Elias Ibrahim discuss their experience in the Balkans in the afternoon panel, "Moving Towards Intercultural Understandings". The audience enjoyed listening and interacting with our alumni and staff, and were very appreciative of their presentations. Click here for more information on this conference.

AV Consulting for University of California, Irvine

Since September 2007, AV has been serving as professional consultants for the University of California, Irvine. Hired by UCI's Chancellor, AV's Gibran Bouayad and Aaron Hahn Tapper have made repeated visits to campus, meeting with faculty, staff, and students connected to and interested in Middle East affairs and Jewish-Muslim dynamics within the U.S. This spring AV will present the Chancellor with our recommendations regarding the on-campus relations between those communities invested in issues of the Middle East, offering our guidance in how to move things forward.

2008-09 Vision Program Applications Pour in from Across the U.S.
As the February 15th deadline for Vision Program applications passes, we are left with a joyous mountain of applications, letters of recommendations and transcripts flooding our in-boxes and our post boxes. We have applicants from every corner of the U.S., from small liberal arts colleges to large public universities. We are excited to review each and every one of the applications we receive and are committed to notifying every candidate by March 14. We wish everyone who applied the best of luck!

2007-08 Vision Program Closes with Final Spring Retreat

The Spring Retreat for the 2007-08 Vision Program on March 6th through the 9th, is drawing near. This retreat will be the final 'formal' step of a long journey. We look forward to making the best out of it.

Being the last official meeting as a group, among other things, the participants will look back and reflect upon the long journey they have taken, together and individually, within the Vision Program. We will primarily focus on exploring the process the group went through during the 10-month program and the ways it affected the participants. Special emphasis will be given to the group process as we ask what kind of changes the participants have gone through as a group:

- The relationships between the Jewish and the Palestinian students at the beginning of the process in the Balkans, and how the relationships evolved thereafter.
- The power relations between the two groups at the beginning of the program and today.
- The relationships between individuals at the beginning of the program and how they evolved.

During the retreat, participants will also think about the future. They will consider how to translate their experiences from the program into action and how they can make use of the experiences and the knowledge they have acquired in the program to make change and to influence what is going on in the "real" world outside the group.

2007-08 Vision Program Fellows Preparing Community Presentations

Starting this month and continuing through the summer, Vision Program Fellows will be giving presentations at university campuses and community centers across the United States. 2007-08 alumni will speak about their Vision Program experiences, what they learned about the Balkan conflicts, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and how the issues embedded in these phenomena pertain to them.

Several presentations have already been given thus far. 2007-08 Vision Program Alumnus Nir Zemynak has already given two presentations and has several others planned. The first presentation was at the high school he attended in Israel, Or Ebin. He spoke about the genocide in Bosnia to 20 students in the senior class. Nir's other presentation was for the Illinois Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce. Entitled, "World Conflict..."
Awareness”, it touched upon the conflicts in Israel-Palestine, the Former Yugoslavia and Darfur. The one-hour presentation with Q&A at the end was given to a group of 25 top students from 6 high schools in the area. Below are comments from two students who attended this discussion:

- “Because we live in such a fast-paced, media-crazed society, I rarely hear real stories of real tragedies such as those Mr. Zernyak told us of. It truly changed my perspective of the world and motivated me to learn more, so I can make a difference.”
- “It’s really important to know what is going on in the world, and it was really interesting to hear it from someone who knows firsthand how our decisions and actions can affect the world.”

Last year’s Vision Program Fellows (i.e., 2006-07 group) reached more than 700 people with their presentations, giving them opportunities to share their personal reflections on their transformations at coffee houses, community centers, high schools, mosques, synagogues, and universities across the country. We hope to reach even more this year and in the many years to come.

Busy Month for Our Unity Program Students

This month has been a very busy month for our students at Heschel and Al-Iman high schools. Not only did they have their third Inter-School Meeting on February 4th, 2008, which explored the topic of identity as well as the issue of power dynamics within the Muslim and Jewish group, but they have also been immersing themselves in the study of Judaism and Islam.

Heschel students completed the “Introduction to Islam” chapter and moved towards comparing and contrasting this chapter with the “Introduction to Judaism” chapter through individual student presentations on parallel lessons and topics in both units.

During this month’s guest speaker series, Dr. Cynthia Miller-Iddris, a professor of education at NYU, spoke to the Heschel students about her experiences as a convert to Islam and about her involvement in the Progressive Islam movement. Linda Sarsour, the Director of Programs for the Arab American Association of New York, described her experiences as a native-born New Yorker choosing to wear hijab (a traditional head-covering) as an adult.

Similarly, Al-Iman Students learned about Jewish Law through the Torah as well as the historical and present day role of the Talmud. The students also began a lesson in our Unity curriculum on movements and denominations of Judaism relating them to the Jewish Diaspora. Guest speaker Joe Skloot, a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, spoke about his life as a Reform Jew and his family history within the movement, being the 4th generation to become a Reform Rabbi. His readings from the Talmud allowed the students to see and hear first hand its purpose and key function within the faith.

In Other News...

New Addition to AV Team

In January 2008, Eitan Trabin joined Abraham’s Vision in our San Francisco office as our Assistant Director of Operations. Eitan was born in Israel and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area when he was nine. Prior to joining Abraham’s Vision, Eitan lived for five years in Central Asia and the North Caucasus, working in a variety of non-profit organizations that focused on inter-communal education. To learn more about him, check out our website.
"Students Speak"

In this feature, we highlight the transformations taking place using our students’ own words. To view additional student reflections, visit our website at www.abrahamsvision.org or click here to view the Vision and Unity weblogs.

THE UNITY PROGRAM

"Hajj is the fifth and last pillar of Islam. It is a pilgrimage to the holy sites in Mecca, where one reconnects with the Islamic heritage and reaffirms his belief in Islam. Mecca is believed to be a city where Abraham and his family resided. When Muslims go on Hajj they revisit the sacred places that Abraham and his family built and their trials through the mountains. On this journey, Muslims spiritually reconnect with their patriarch and prophet Abraham and reaffirm their belief in Allah. It is believed that God told Abraham to build Kabah, a holy site in Mecca, where he was supposed to bring all of mankind. This belief provides the foundation for Hajj and reasons for Muslims to perform this ritual. This practice, which is obligatory on all Muslims, makes a meaningful contribution to the Islamic faith because going on this journey and participating along side millions of Muslims creates a new experience, which many Muslims consider transformational."

To read the entirety of the submission by Arthur Meyster, visit our 2007-08 Unity NYC Program Weblog.

"Muslims should stop mixing their societal and cultural trend with Islam, they should not waste their time dividing themselves; this defeats the purpose of the Shari’ah and what true Muslims should believe in. Due to these changes within the faith, people outside of Islam see it in another way. Last but not least those followers of Islam who are born Muslims should not take it for granted; they should not think that they know their religion completely. It is wiser to study in-depth Islam and recognize how beautiful it is. This is one of the main reasons why converts to Islam are more religious because they study Islam and know what it actually means and keep and follow the true message."

To read the entirety of the submission by Ramla Hussain, visit our 2007-08 Unity NYC Program Weblog.

THE VISION PROGRAM

"I recently became the education coordinator for The Culture Project, a non-profit theatre company in Manhattan, whose mission is to bear witness to injustice by maximizing artistic resources to stimulate challenging conversation about the most profound and urgent matters of our time. The Culture Project recognizes the invaluable opportunities found in educational and political theatre. By doing so, we hope to develop and diversify our audience by forming relationships with communities and schools that are interested in dialogue and social change."

To read the entirety of the submission by Simnia Singer-Sayada as it was published in Common Ground News Service, visit our 2007-08 Vision Program Weblog.

"As a Palestinian, I do believe that in order to reach a viable solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Israelis should acknowledge that the establishment of their state is the immediate cause of the suffering and misery of the Palestinian nation. The pre-compromise period acknowledgment of Palestinians’ loss will settle any post-compromise disputes. In other words, if Israel admits that it had no right to exist on Palestine and if the Palestinians accept Israel’s existence as a fixed reality, our future will no longer involve aimless debates about whose land is it."

To review the entirety of the submission by Samy Karmout, written while still traveling in the Balkans in July 2007, visit our 2007-08 Vision Program Weblog.

To read weblogs from some of our past programs, please go to the following links from 2006-07: Vision Program student weblog, SAR intra-community student weblog and Al-I'man/Heschel interschool weblog, or go back to the 2005-06 students weblog, our first AV program!

HOW ARE WE DIFFERENT?

Abraham’s Vision is a conflict transformation organization that explores group and individual identities through experiential and political education. Examining social relations with and between the Jewish, Muslim, Israeli, and Palestinian communities, we empower participants to practice just alternatives to the status quo.

We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit conflict transformation organization, dedicated to creating a new generation of leaders empowered and committed to improving our world. Our distinct vision is based on the following principles:

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Equal Partnerships: We are committed to equal partnerships across ethnic, religious, and gender lines. This commitment is reflected in our organizational structure as well as our long-term programs, workshops, and presentations.

Experiential Learning: We are committed to creative forms of education that both recognize the importance of content-based teaching and value individual and group participant experiences.

Encounters: We approach inter-group encounters as a reflection of the political realities in which we live, utilizing them as a central element of our educational approach.

Political Education: We focus on individual and collective relationships within current political realities, placing the relationship between individuals and groups at the center of the educational experience rather than analyzing political developments as something separate from students.