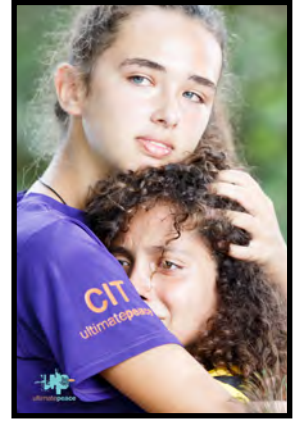


Camp UP 2017: Stories From Off the Field



Dear Friend of UP,

August 20th, 2017

It's hard to describe the feeling I am having one month after our 8th summer of camp. Camp UP was, as usual, a highlight of the year for me. Likely for most everyone who attended. There is really nothing else like it. Yet I worry sometimes we are starting to take for granted the highly unlikely happening that occurs in our Oasis of Peace each summer. We have become accustomed to the everyday miracles of cross-cultural connection and friendship that spring up in every corner of our campus at Kfar Silver. Even the deep friendships that are enduring into adulthood for former campers and young leaders are starting to seem normal. I guess that's mostly good, yet I never want to forget what we are actually witnessing.

The purpose of this letter is to name some of those moments, to share a few of my observations and experiences that happened off the Ultimate field. I know there are many hundreds more of which I was not aware. Hopefully this little collage of snippets - adults and children from different cultures and religions thriving in this intentional community - will illustrate the complexity and intensity of the impact of UP. Thank you for being such a critical partner on this journey. I want to express my deepest appreciation for your ongoing support, and I hope you enjoy the stories.

Toqa, Avishag, Nomi, and Sadan

Most campers room with friends from their own towns, but every year more campers decide to live in culturally mixed rooms. Two Jewish girls, Nomi and Avishag, and two Muslim girls, Toqa and Sadan, made that choice this summer. During rest time, Toqa told her Jewish roommates that she and Sadan were going to do their daily prayers. Nomi and Avishag understood the importance and began to read. Once prayers were over, they all went right back to chatting and telling stories like they always did. The next day, Toqa shared appreciation for Avishag and Nomi in a team meeting. With tears in her eyes, she thanked them for **“showing mutual respect”** (a UP value) for their culture and religion. She reached out to hug her dear friends - few dry eyes remained.



Nour

Nour is a young Palestinian man from Bethlehem. He grew up in a refugee camp and lives there today. Nour, now 19, came to the program as a 14 year-old camper in 2012, despite family and community concerns. He then participated in the Leader in Training Program over 3 years, and this summer served as a Coach on staff.



Every summer, once the campers go home, staff have a beach party. As logistics were sorted out, it became clear that Nour needed to chaperone West Bank campers home on the bus. A few of his friends found out that he had **never been to a beach**, had never swum in the sea. Borders and checkpoints excluded that from his life experience. So Jalal and Hosa, two good friends who live in Israel, volunteered to miss the much anticipated party and take Nour's place. He went to the beach that day, and I was honored to go in the water with him. And teach him to body surf! After getting thrown around by waves, he looked at me and said, "I never want to get out".



Marcel and Liam

Marcel is a 12 year-old Palestinian boy from Bethlehem. Liam is a 12-year old boy from Jerusalem. They ended up on the same team at camp, and become fast friends from the first day. Both **monolingual**, they mostly communicated through play and gesture, according to their coaches. I hung out with their team one afternoon. What I observed - two playful kids who had no cares about their differences. Mostly, they just liked to goof around together. They sat next to each other at meals, walked side by side around camp, passed the disc back and forth. As unlikely and compatible as friends can be.



The Dragons

Every summer I latch onto a team. It makes camp extra fun and ensures I connect with the heartbeat of daily camp life. This year I joined a girls team, the Dragons. I ate meals with them and joined their daily structured group discussions. 3 days in, the girls were struggling. They were shy and cultural lines were seeming tough to cross.



So we did an exercise in our afternoon talk: "Share one thing you like about the person to your left." Like a dam that had broken, beautiful compliments poured out, one after another, as if they had been all waiting for that moment. One Arab girl took a risk and reached out to a Jewish teammate: "I think you are an awesome person. **I really want to be your friend.**" The team turned a corner that day, becoming one of the closest teams in camp.



Yasmeen and Yaron

Our LIT graduates, campers starting in 2010, are becoming adults. Yaron was just released from the Israeli military as a commander. Yasmeen is soon headed off to Romania for Medical School. A Jewish man and a Muslim woman - so different. Yet before camp, very similar stories. This past June, each asked this question: **“How is UP relevant in my life today?”** Yasmeen had been politically active this year, protesting the demolition of Bedouin homes. Yaron trained officers to lead IDF soldiers for the last two years.

Both decided to come to camp to answer that question. UP had been a big part of their youth and identities. Yasmeen’s skepticism was strong, but after serving as psychosocial counselor for campers needing a good listener, she told us she had renewed purpose. Attending to Jews and Arabs all day fulfilled her, and prepared her for her future profession - psychiatrist!

Yaron got up in orientation and let us know he was rediscovering himself at UP, reconnecting with the part of his personality that had evolved in the program. As he told stories where he had corrected soldiers who spoke in racist ways during his 3 years of service, he realized how much this was due to the multicultural friendships he’d made within UP. He was stunned by how many Jews had zero exposure in the army, and felt it was his duty to educate them about the beauty and commonality of their region’s diversity.

Yasmeen plans to return each summer to build on her counseling role. Yaron will coach in our most difficult communities this year. UP is fortunate.



Noah

Our North American LIT program brings 10 - 12 select teens to camp each summer to work alongside Middle East LITs. They are a dynamic group of young people who add great value to camp with their “third party” points of view. Noah, a 16 year-old from Berkeley, CA, shared his thoughts after camp on Facebook as a way of helping those outside of the Middle East see that what they read in the paper does not describe all that is happening:

*“I saw these young children treat each other with more respect and kindness than many adults do in their own communities. **Camp is a real life version of the world in which I dream of living.**”*

*Many LITs expressed to me that their **best friends** are from the other culture. To put this into perspective, some also admitted to me that before joining Ultimate Peace, they **hated** people from the other culture or believed almost all of them to be bad.*

I was lucky enough to witness just a tiny bit of political dialogue and was in awe of the respect and kindness with which LIT’s treated each other despite their unmistakably different perspectives and the pain they felt. UP is the most inspiring, meaningful, and thought-provoking journey I have ever taken.”





I hope that these stories reinforce the importance and power of Ultimate Peace. Again, thank you for your ongoing belief in and support of the work. And just in case you are wondering what was happening **on** the field, here are a few pictures to give you a taste.

Peace, Salaam, Shalom,

David

