

Ultimate Peace in Bethlehem, West Bank

Noam Sandweiss-Back '15 and Gabriel Frankel '15
Wesleyan University
Projects for Peace 2011 Proposal

Introduction:

In an environment of historic divisions, fostering peace and cross-cultural exchange between Palestinians and Israelis is ever challenging, but ever more important. Promoting peace in the region requires programs and grassroots movements to address the issues that politics is often unable to. Citizens must cross the ethnic, cultural, and political divisions to map a road towards lasting peace. It will take citizens willing and capable of listening to opposing viewpoints, finding a common ground, and resolving disputes to build peace.

These necessary steps are embodied by and foundational to the game of Ultimate Frisbee. "Ultimate" was created in the spirit of sportsmanship, personal responsibility, and fair play. Ultimate is officiated by the players on the field, not a referee. When players disagree about a foul, travel, or out-of-bounds, they must resolve the dispute together.

Ultimate Peace (UP) was founded in 2009 to spearhead Ultimate Frisbee organizing amongst and between Jewish Israeli, Arab Israeli, and Palestinian youth in Israel and the West Bank. At its most basic level UP's organizing is grounded in a desire to use the spirit of Ultimate Frisbee as a means of promoting communal awareness and togetherness, self-discovery/respect, and the breaking of cultural and geographic barriers. UP functions as a medium through which children from three seemingly distinct and different demographics can meet, learn together, and bring shared experiences back to their own communities to serve as role models for other youth.

Last summer, UP brought over 150 youth from four Jewish Israeli communities, five Arab Israeli communities, and two Palestinian communities to Akko, Israel for a week of Ultimate Frisbee summer camp. World-class Frisbee players, largely from the United States, use their own money and donate their time to serve as coaches and staff, leading kids in Frisbee related activities, multi-cultural team play, and off-the-field, traditional summer camp team building. The campers play, eat, dance, sing, swim, and bond in multi-cultural teams and living spaces. UP runs monthly Frisbee sessions in each participating community as well as quarterly "Hat-Tournaments", cross-cultural and inclusive tournaments held in Israel, to reinforce and sustain the lessons taught at summer camp.

Objectives:

Ultimate Frisbee in Israel and the West Bank is an effective means for building peace because as a relatively new sport nearly all of its participants begin on a level playing field. However, because of on-the-ground realities that includes difficult border crossings and large transportation costs between the West Bank and Israel, there has been, since UP's inaugural year, a disproportionate ratio of Israeli participants as compared to Palestinian ones. With that in mind, our goals for the 2012-2013 UP "season", and beyond, are:

- To support the introduction of Palestinian youth from the West Bank city of Bethlehem into the Ultimate Peace family,
- To bring ten Bethlehem youth to the UP summer camp and allow them to meet, for perhaps the first time, Jewish and Arab Israeli youth. This will add a new perspective, communal narrative, and voice to the camp, and further balance the ratio of Jewish Israeli, Arab Israeli, and Palestinian players,
- To host six communal Frisbee sessions in Bethlehem, before and after the UP summer camp, to introduce the game to the Bethlehem youth, follow up on the lessons taught at the summer camp, and strengthen the bonds between Bethlehem players by giving them a new forum for community engagement,

- To empower those Bethlehem players to bring their skills and stories home and become leaders both within their own communities and the broader UP community.

Sustainability:

Our project is designed to lay the groundwork for a more culturally balanced UP community and sustainable Ultimate Frisbee development in the West Bank. Dr. David Barkan and Linda Sidorsky, UP's founders and current directors, have assured us that UP will remain devoted to Bethlehem beyond our partnership this summer. After we introduce the game to Bethlehem and solidify the Bethlehem-Ultimate Peace partnership, monthly practices will be organized in Bethlehem and the summer camp participants will join the larger UP family at quarterly hat-tournaments before the yearly summer camp. The monthly practices will encourage greater participation within Bethlehem and hat-tournaments will bring the kids into Israel four times a year to play on integrated teams with Israelis. As they grow older and become more confident Ultimate Frisbee players, youth from Bethlehem will have the opportunity to work through the Ultimate Peace CIT training program (that is currently open for UP youth participants) to learn the skills for successful coaching and leadership. The introduction of a significant Palestinian city like Bethlehem into the UP network will hopefully open new doors for UP's own expansion in the West Bank and further catalyze the development of Ultimate Frisbee amongst Palestinian youth.

Qualifications:

We are both Frisbee players on "Nitzche Factor", Wesleyan's all-male Frisbee team. During both the UP Summer Camp and the community sessions beforehand and afterward we will be responsible for leading the Bethlehem cohort and lending our own Frisbee experience throughout. During our travels through Israel and the West Bank we have a network of family and friends to host us, UP contacts to host in Bethlehem, and conversational Hebrew as an aid.

How This Project Supports Peace:

Over the past three years the efforts of Ultimate Peace have added an important and new dimension to community peace building in Israel/Palestine. The program has not only united youth from diverse backgrounds in summer camps and hat tournaments but it has reached politicians on the regional and international stage. The Ministry of Sport in Israel named UP as an exemplary program and this past September sent over one hundred Israeli and international dignitaries to observe Jewish-Israelis, Arab-Israelis, and Palestinians uniting over the game of Ultimate Frisbee at a local hat-tournament. While UP strives to provide an equal number of youth from the respective demographics, the challenges of crossing borders makes it difficult to have a proportionate amount of Palestinian youth. The inclusion and integration of new communities into the program is what has allowed Ultimate Peace to be as successful as it has been.

With the work we propose in Bethlehem and Israel we will support a small but visible community whose participation has the potential to add a new component to the UP family and further the discourse amongst youth in the region. Our work in Bethlehem will support an effort to use Ultimate Frisbee to affect an often under resourced city and to further diversify an assemblage of kids who are often told their differences are too great, but who have proved that it is possible to find common ground on the playing field.