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SUCCESS STORY

Youth Network Spreads Message of Tolerance



Tanya Abi Nassif and Khalid Jazari participate in a small group activity at a Beirut workshop that connected students from different communities.

“I thought I knew how to listen, but in the workshop I recognized there is a difference between hearing what someone says, and listening, understanding, and accepting.”

—Tanya Abi Nassif, a 16-year-old student at Beirut’s City International School

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June 2008 – Lebanese students from diverse social, religious, and political backgrounds got together in a recent workshop to share ideas on citizenship and democracy and on how to turn those ideas into action.

The workshop was run by the Beirut chapter of a newly formed nationwide youth network committed to fostering civic activism through community-based initiatives.

The network consists of 180 youths from all regions of Lebanon who have been trained in leadership, communication, and conflict resolution skills through a three-month activity funded by the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). These youths elected representatives to attend a recent training-of-trainers workshop focused on how to transfer skills to other young people and how to lead projects in their communities.

One member of the Beirut group, 20-year-old Saadeddin Al Kurdi, explained that the workshop was designed to connect youth across a common activity and “to initiate dialogue on key issues that concern them, forge links between their estranged communities, and reduce unfounded fear of ‘the other.’”

Hani Mikkawi, 14, admits he was at first hesitant to attend the workshop, unsure of how others would perceive him. He later realized that “even if we are from different social classes and religions, we all share the same thoughts and feelings.”

An OTI partner, the Kamel Youssef Jaber Cultural and Social Center, created the network in March by establishing, linking, and training six socially active youth groups from all regions of Lebanon. The groups went on to design and implement projects in their communities, including campaigns on student rights, youth volunteerism, and self-expression.

For community activist Maria Assi, who coordinated the project in all of the country’s governorates, the youth participants have come to see themselves as “a microcosm of the Lebanon they want to see.”

Echoing this sentiment, 20-year-old Al Kurdi said the training and youth-led activities “empowered us with the ideas and skills to pass the message of tolerance on to others.”