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Give peace a chance

One woman doesn't just protest on weekends – she's made a career out of peace

By: Diane Selkirk



"Peace comes from being able to contribute the best that we have, and all that we are, toward creating a world that supports everyone. But it is also securing the space for others to contribute the best that they have and all that they are."—Hafsat Abiola

Reena Lazar is a peace educator. Her job isn't one she found through a help wanted ad or at a career fair—instead it's a position she created for herself, "I had a good job as a sustainable-development consultant—but this is the one I love so much it doesn't feel like work." The dream of finding an amazing career that allows us to give something back to our community is one many of us have, but fulfilling the dream is another story.

Forty-four year old Lazar says she's long wanted to be a peace builder, "someone who brought together both sides of a conflict so they could gain an understanding of each other." But it wasn't until 2004, that all of her life experiences came together in the creation of [Peace it Together](http://www.creativepeacenetwork.ca/) (<http://www.creativepeacenetwork.ca/>) , an education program that brings thirty Palestinian, Israeli, and Canadian teenagers together in British Columbia.

Listening for peace

Lazar grew up the youngest of six in a family that she describes as having a strong Jewish identity. As a young adult she often travelled to Israel, where her sympathies lay with the Jewish-Israeli experience. At university she was exposed to a new perspective; she met people who challenged her beliefs and presented the idea that Palestinians have rights. In the late 1990's, Lazar embarked on a tour through Israel and the occupied territories led by the [Compassionate Listening Project](http://www.compassionatelistening.org/) (<http://www.compassionatelistening.org/>) : "I listened to real people from all perspectives speak about the how the conflict affected them. I had a big cry every night for that first week."

Lazar says she was transformed by the experience and wanted to do more, but she knew her role wasn't just to represent just one side of the conflict. "I wanted to find a way for people to gain an understanding of each other." Lazar began exploring peace education programs and she says was amazed by what she saw when Israeli and Palestinian teens simply had a chance to meet and tell each other their stories; "they made meaningful connections that quickly became very loving."

Lazar began Peace it Together, and the first gathering in 2004 was a program modeled on different youth programs she visited in the U.S. But Lazar says she felt the teens needed an opportunity to do more than just talk: "Figuring out who is right and who is wrong wasn't getting us to a solution. To get to peace we need to move forward and create our future." Lazar discovered that film was a medium that forced the kids to work together while they told their stories, "It's difficult to make a film by yourself—and I loved the idea of adversaries creating together."

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In 2006 the program ran again—bringing a group of 29 Israeli and Palestinian and Canadian teens to Galiano Island to make films. The teens worked together in the peaceful setting, while back in the Middle East, Israel and Hezbollah were engaged in a bloody conflict. In the summer of 2008 the third, three-week-long Peace it Together program was held on Bowen Island.

Lazar says the quality of the films that came out of the two projects were so impressive they were able to expand the program's educational component. And thanks to a significant grant from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation they are taking the films that were produced in Canada and using them as part of an educational package for high schools in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Lazar is already hard at work planning for the next Peace it Together camp, which will be in 2010, and while Lazar says that nothing about her work is easy, it's everything she's ever wanted. She explains that the need for "people to people" programs is vital to our future: "The peace created by politicians is as fragile as the piece of paper it's written on."

Check out some of the Peace it Together films:

[Inspired](http://www.creativepeacenetwork.ca/film_view.asp?id=8) (http://www.creativepeacenetwork.ca/film_view.asp?id=8) (10:31) [Documentary]

Palestinian, Israeli and Canadian participants discuss the inspiration they found in each other during the Peace it Together summer program. They reveal what they learned from the experience and how they hope to make a difference when they go back to their own communities.

[Heaven Forbid](http://www.creativepeacenetwork.ca/film_view.asp?id=12) (http://www.creativepeacenetwork.ca/film_view.asp?id=12) (4:09) [Drama]

Two girls, one Israeli and the other Palestinian, meet on a deserted island. They have no memory of their past, but as their friendship blossoms they start to remember how they got there.