



Brenda Rosenberg, center front, poses with members of Peace Child Israel, a theater arts organization that brings together Jewish and Arab teens in a similar manner to the Reuniting the Children of Abraham program, while in Israel this spring at an international conflict resolution conference.

In a new light

'Children of Abraham' recreates biblical story to reunite faiths

BY SUSAN STEINMUELLER
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On a stage, teens in a documentary get up one by one and describe their feelings to attentive peers.

That's not unusual, except that these teens are Christians, Muslims and Jews. And they're talking about religion.

One says she was teased by classmates because of her Muslim attire. Another says in his neighborhood, he never saw anyone who wasn't of his own Christian faith.

Each seems surprised at the revelations and beliefs of others. They also are surprised to find that they all trace their heritage back to Abraham and worship the same God. In the end, they express empathy and come to an understanding. "You don't have to be wrong for me to be right," says one.

The documentary is called *Reuniting the Children of Abraham* and includes the teen's conversations, enacted flash-backs to Biblical times and music. It's part of a multi-media project, *Children of*



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Abraham, which builds bridges of understanding between religions, cultures and races.

The play is inspired by the story of Abraham's two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, coming together to bury their father. Isaac was the father of the Jews and later the Christians, while Ishmael is the father of the Muslims. Abraham plays a significant role in the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran.

"Historically, nothing was written

about their conversations, so we have the opportunity to tell the story in a new light," said Brenda Rosenberg, project founder. "The play can open minds and hearts by showing how peace is possible when we are willing to come together."

OVERCOMING STEREOTYPES

Children of Abraham calls for teens of different backgrounds to engage in dialogue and role-playing in order to understand each other. Rosenberg, of Bloomfield Hills, recalls the first project, in which the teens met for three months once a week. Participating teens of different races, religions and communities, including Detroit and Bloomfield Hills, had to overcome significant stereotypes about one another.

"In the beginning, they did not think they could be friends," she said. "It took four weeks just to go beyond the superficial."

But they did become friends. "We who were hoping to facilitate transformation were transformed ourselves by the project," said one.

Victor Begg, founder of the Muslim Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills, helped Rosenberg get the project started; his son and daughter both participated in the play and documentary.

Begg, of Bloomfield Hills, said when he first heard about the project he was elated that "someone is taking the initiative and getting the story out that we belong

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to one family, that Father Abraham is our common ancestor."

Begg, who has been active in interfaith work, added, "The whole project is by children. That makes a major difference."

The documentary has been presented at churches, mosques, synagogues, schools and other locations.

In March, the multimedia program called *Toolkit 4 Peace*, showing all the available materials for groups to use, previewed at Kirk in the Hills in Bloomfield Hills.

This spring, Rosenberg took the documentary and program to a conference in Israel on creative approaches to overcoming conflict. She now has an invitation to present it in Jordan.

ENTHUSIASTIC RECEPTION

The interest gives

Rosenberg hope for building bridges of peace. But she knows it's not easy.

The former Federated Department Stores vice president recalls with a smile that when beginning the project, "I thought if I was responsible for \$380 million worth of products for Federated Department Stores, how hard would it be to bring Christians, Muslims, Jews together? If I had had any clue as to how challenging it can be, I would have never taken it on."

Rosenberg is active in her Bloomfield Hills synagogue, Temple Beth El. But she only became involved in the interfaith movement toward the end of a fashion retailing career that included positions at Saks Fifth Ave. and the former J.L. Hudson Co.

Her first desire to do something to build understanding was after the Columbine High School massacre. If the two students who went on the shooting rampage had been

able to share with others feelings of being degraded or stereotyped, would things have been different, she wondered.

But it was Sept. 11, 2001, that caused her to take action: "My heart said, you need to reach out as a Jew and build relationships with Muslims and Christians."

A DREAM OF PEACE

She met with area religious leaders to discuss what could be done locally. When Imam Abdullah El Amin from the Muslim Center of Detroit spoke of Isaac and Ishmael coming together to bury their father Abraham, "It was an epiphany."

That night, she dreamed of the archangel Raphaela taking the young Isaac and Ishmael through a four-step healing process of reconciliation.

It included breaking bread together; turning to each one in turn and having them tell what it was like for them to be

Abraham's son while the other listened without criticism; role-playing by retelling the story from the others' point of view; and then creating a new story.

"In my dream, the brothers agreed to write a play for teens on how compassionate listening can lead to understanding each others positions and begin the reconciliation process," she said.

Imam Abdullah and the Rev. Dan Buttry of the Baptist Peace Fellowship helped her create an outline for a children's play.

Then her friend Julie Cummings of Birmingham suggested she call Rick Sperling at Mosaic Youth Theatre. She did so and the play was on its way. Playwright Rochel Urist and the NCCJ Interfaith Partners also contributed.

A NEW STORY

The program is showing fruits as people who have been involved have brought new

interfaith efforts to their endeavors.

And it is receiving national attention. It was featured as a CBS network special. On Thursday, it aired nationally on the Bridges cable television station.

Rosenberg wants to bring the project to even more people.

"If we could learn to love our differences instead of fearing them, wouldn't that be wonderful," she said.

"People are afraid you have to change, but you don't. You can stand on your own faith and still reach out to others."

Rosenberg compares the project to a tool kit that can be used for peace: "We have all the tools for peace, we just have to open up the tool box and start using them."

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