

St. Louis teens join the circus to promote peace



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Maya Zuckerman, a Jewish St. Louis teenager, and Hla Asadi, an Arab-Muslim teenager in the Galilee area of Israel, have been defying stereotypes in Israel the last three weeks.

“Shalom and Salaam” — peace in any language — is possible, they say.

With youthful exuberance, Maya and eight other children and teenagers from St. Louis, and Hla plus 17 from Galilee

have been doing handsprings, clowning around, soaring on trapezes and becoming great pals as part of a multicultural, international youth circus troupe, The Galilee Arches.

The nine St. Louis performers, who range in age from 10 to 20, belong to Circus Harmony’s elite St. Louis Arches troupe. The Israeli children are from the Jewish and Arab Galilee Circus that’s part of the Galilee Foundation for Value Education.

The combined Galilee Arches, with Muslim, Jewish and Christian youth, first performed in 2007 and generally assembles every other year for appearances in Israel and St. Louis.

“We create peace through pyramids, joy through juggling and harmony through handsprings,” said Jessica Hentoff, artistic and executive director of St. Louis Circus Harmony. After years in circus work, including Circus Flora, she reorganized Circus Harmony as a nonprofit in 2001 to inspire social change in St. Louis and around the world among people of different religions, races, nationalities and economic backgrounds.

Hentoff traveled to Israel July 9 with the young performers and adult chaperones Bill Dodson and Leslie Tupper, amid a barrage of rockets falling on Israel.

In that setting, the young friendships of The Galilee Arches have taken on increased significance.

Maya, 15, of University City, and Hla, 16, of Deir el Assad, have enjoyed shooting selfies and sightseeing. Maya’s first cousin Ari Maayan, 14, also of University City, is the troupe’s premiere unicyclist. Others from St. Louis are: Lilly Bowman, Austin Buhr, Nick Dodson, Donesha Buhr, Isabella Majzun, Kyran Walton and Mark Wheeler.

“In a time when no one else seems able to find a road map for peace ... these remarkable young people demonstrate in a breathtaking way what can happen when people of different nationalities and background build something together,” Hentoff said.

The St. Louis group had been scheduled to return on a United Airlines flight Wednesday night but the temporary ban on U.S. carriers flying in and out of Tel Aviv pulled the curtain on those plans. As of now, the St. Louis group is due in St. Louis around 9:30 a.m. Tuesday.

Hentoff, in a telephone interview from northern Israel, said that the children were thrilled about the

delay.

They have been staying with circus host families in both Jewish and Arab villages. Ordinarily, the villages are segregated by religion.

“But when our kids are there, it brings people together,” Hentoff said.

She has kept parents informed through a blog and on Facebook.

“We had just finished our final show and were sitting down to a feast cooked for everyone by the families when we got the call from one of our stateside parents about the airline flight ban,” Hentoff wrote on her blog. “My students had actually been begging me to extend our stay here in Israel.”

“Our hosts have graciously extended their continued hospitality. People have donated activities and food. We have booked additional shows and workshops. Today we ate, swam and took a theater class at a kibbutz. The kids are fine.”

Ari’s mother is Cheryl Maayan, head of school for the Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School. She was in Israel for an educators’ conference when she heard the sirens in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

After the conference, she traveled to Galilee to check on the children.

“I wanted to get away from the sirens and to see how the kids were,” she said. There, “I discovered a pocket of peace.”

She stayed two days in an Arab village with Hla’s Arab-Muslim family and experienced the Muslim observance of Ramadan, fasting during the day and eating Knafeh and other Arab treats late into the night. They also shared a Shabbat, or Jewish Sabbath, dinner.

“We bonded over delicious food, face cream and our amazingly talented children,” Maayan said. “I don’t believe it when people say there’s no hope.”

Speaking in Hebrew, she and Hla’s mother Sameha “got to love each other. We became Facebook friends, and we are circus moms together.”

Hla’s mother and other Arabs she met “want peace as much as we do,” Maayan said.

“It’s a dream for a parent of a teenager to know that your kid is doing something that’s making a positive impact,” Maayan added. “Ari is doing something meaningful in a place where they really need people bringing hope.”

Hentoff emphasized the safety of the Galilee area.

“You would never know that a war is raging just a few hours away.”

In St. Louis, Circus Harmony holds classes year-round at City Museum and performs about 300 times a year. The troupe recently started a Trapeze Center at Union Station. In summer, some of the children perform with Circus Flora.

Most importantly, Hentoff said, Circus Harmony seeks to build bridges between communities and people.

In the circus, “It doesn’t matter whether you are Jew or Arab,” she said. “These ordinary young people have done extraordinary work showing the world what is possible when you focus on what you can do together instead of on what sets you apart.”