

Mirowitz, Ferguson kids join to build 'Pyramids' of peace

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By David Baugher. Special to the Jewish Light



Cheryl Maayan, Head of School at Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School, gets flowers and a hug from students after their circus performance with students from Ferguson last week. Photo: Andrew Kerman

At first, Cheryl Maayan wasn't aware of the significance of the date. Ultimately, she felt the timing of the "Peace Through Pyramids" event in Ferguson made it more special.

"We didn't even know that we planned this performance on (what would have been) the 19th birthday of Michael Brown," Maayan, head of Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School, said as she stood in a hallway near a noisy room full of youngsters at the Ferguson Municipal Library. Maayan was at the library on the evening of May 20 for "Peace Through Pyramids," a circus-themed performance featuring nine Mirowitz students teamed with 23 children from Ferguson, the St. Louis suburb wracked by

protests and rioting in the wake of the fatal shooting of Brown by a police officer last summer.

But this day was a time for healing. The performance featured juggling, feather balancing and hula-hoop tumbling. Maayan said that the show, for which the children had spent weeks practicing, was a way of learning about the power of collaboration.

"Circus arts require perseverance," she said. "Students have to stick with it. You can't just pick up balls and juggle them. You have to really work hard at it. That's the message we want to send. You can't just build a pyramid in a moment. You have to build trust and cooperation with other children who are part of that pyramid."

The concept for "Peace Through Pyramids" isn't a new one. It premiered in the Middle East courtesy of Circus Harmony and its performance group, the St. Louis Arches, which teamed with an Arab/Israeli troupe to put on the effort beginning in 2007.

Jessica Hentoff, leader of Circus Harmony, said she was thrilled to see families from Ferguson and Mirowitz eating at the event's after-party.

"To have this opportunity for them to come together and to break bread together, that's community," Hentoff said.

Last year, when Hentoff's performers visited Israel, they had to stay a bit longer than expected. Officials imposed a flight ban due to the war in Gaza. The Arches finally headed back to St. Louis at the end of July. Less than two weeks later, Brown was killed.

Hentoff said last week's Ferguson performance attracted people she hadn't seen in a while, including someone from the very first class of Arches.

"She came to the show and brought her children," she said. "It was amazing."

Janice Bugett-Hygrade of Ferguson, whose daughter Jade was among the performers, said that her youngster loved being involved in the festivities and that she was glad her family could be part of helping the community come together.

"Kids don't know anything about racism and stuff like that unless you tell them," Bugett-Hygrade said. "I want my daughter to love everybody."

In the aftermath of the shooting, Bugett-Hygrade began an after-school program for several children in her neighborhood. Five of them eventually joined the circus performance.

"When it rains, there is going to be a rainbow," she said. "I look at all the Jewish community, all my friends, as a rainbow. It helps us get through, because this is a hard time for all of us, not just me, the kids, too."

Ferguson participant Kara Ellis, 14, who will enter ninth grade this year, said she'd like to be a part of more activities such as this. She enjoyed learning new skills, such as balancing on a ball during one of the evening's more challenging routines.

"Some people think, 'Oh, I can't stand on a ball.' I never knew of it before the circus," she said. "Now, I know how to do it."

Aviva Kiernan, 11, of Maplewood, a Mirowitz sixth-grader, said she loved to make new acquaintances.

"It gave me a chance to meet new people, and I thought it was really fun," said Aviva, who enjoyed being part of a plate-spinning performance. "Without 'Peace Through Pyramids,' I wouldn't be able to have met some of my best friends."

Fellow sixth-grader Faith Faro of Creve Coeur agreed.

"I think that being able to connect with the Ferguson kids and helping them through a tough time is really something great that we can do to help the world," Faith said. "It's been really great knowing people from different places, getting to know them and being friends with them."

Maayan said that's the idea behind "Peace Through Pyramids."

"Students who had really never been in the other place from both communities have had a new experience and made new friends," she said. "That's really the point of the project. We want to build peace by helping our children reach out to other communities and work together."

Scott Bonner, director of the Ferguson library, said he hopes that's what the project accomplished.

"I think that every time kids learn new things and every time they make new contacts, it expands their horizons and makes them better people," he said. "That's what I like about what we did tonight."