



Children at Hope Flowers could pave the way for peace between Israelis and Palestinians

# Teaching peace

Young Palestinians and Israelis are learning to live together in this unique setting, writes **Eve Menezes Cunningham**

It may be difficult to imagine surviving day to day in occupied Palestine, but the staff at Hope Flowers Kindergarten and School are doing more than just surviving by refusing to give up their visions of peace, democracy and hope for their country. They provide a sanctuary as well as education for the children in their care.

Based in south Bethlehem in the village of Al-Khader, Hope Flowers began as the Al-Amal Child Care Centre in 1984 and evolved into an internationally renowned peace centre. The progressive kindergarten and school uses Montessori methods. It provides mixed gender as well as inter-faith classes of Jewish, Christian and Muslim children.

Former refugee Hussein Ibrahim Issa founded Hope Flowers to provide the safety and support necessary for children to grow into future citizens of a peaceful and democratic Palestine. Starting from one rented room, Hope Flowers grew into a small kindergarten and then school (up to Grade 6). It was educating hundreds of children before the Intifada uprising in 2000.

The curriculum is based on peace and democracy. Once a week, children have a special peace and democracy class tailored according to the ages of the children and ranging from teach-

ing kindness to animals to countering negative stereotyping.

Hope Flowers relies on international donors, governments, non-governmental organisations and individuals as well as the few parents who can afford to contribute. International supporters, determined to keep the kindergarten and school open as a memorial to Hussein, continue to raise the necessary funds. The kindergarten and school have been attacked by both Israeli and Palestinian extremists.

Ibrahim Issa, Hussein's son, is now co-director and principal of Hope Flowers. Speaking last December at a Ministry for Peace event at the House of Commons in London, Ibrahim said the aim is to 'create a generation of Palestinians and Israelis who believe in peace. Peace education is delivered by the teachers, the parents and the students. All the teachers are loyal to the school philosophy and we have always involved the family in peace education. The combination between the school and parents is good. We provide training and counselling for the parents.'

He talked about when the school brought two groups of Israeli and Palestinian children together and asked them to draw their future together. One picture, showing flags intertwined, was used widely by the international media.

Since the kindergarten's inception, staff and supporters have been working to bring Palestinian and Jewish Israelis together peacefully and safely. Before the 2000 Intifada, Hope Flowers had an exchange programme with the Democratic School of Hadera in Israel, its 'sister school'. The school began teaching Hebrew in 1990. At the time, many Palestinians felt this was betrayal, but the staff wanted to minimise the fear that difference brings about. According to Ibrahim, most of the schools in Bethlehem now recognise the need to teach the Hebrew language too.

Many of the children have psychological problems resulting from the ongoing violence. They have lost family, neighbours and homes and are in a

state of despair. According to Ibrahim, 'The political peace process will never exist without the population's peace process. The effect of the trauma will appear after the violence ends. Teachers are trained because we can't afford enough counsellors.'

Glastonbury-based Pam Perry has been involved with this through her organisation, Jerusalem Peacemakers. Ms Perry says the main objective is to help to raise a new generation believing in peace, democracy, freedom and respect for the rights of others. 'Unless issues arising from increasing trauma and deprivation are resolved positively, the current downward-spiralling cycle of violence is likely to carry on into future generations,' she says.

This project will continue well into the future. It involves training the teachers to give psychological support to children and families as well as dealing with their own grief arising from the occupation. International support, including that from the Tavistock Clinic in London, has been vital.

Ms Perry says, 'The Hope Flowers Psychological Programme will assist people to cope with their stress and explore alternative and peaceful ways of working with conflict resolution.'

The fact that Hope Flowers is still standing is a triumph. Ibrahim Issa remains optimistic that in spite of attempts by the Palestinian authorities and the Israeli government to shut it down, the kindergarten will continue to thrive for years to come.

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## Further information

For more information, please see

- [www.hope-flowers.org](http://www.hope-flowers.org)
- [www.jerusalem-peacemakers.org](http://www.jerusalem-peacemakers.org)
- [www.ministryforpeace.org.uk](http://www.ministryforpeace.org.uk)