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My Montreal: St. Laurent teens learn about Living Together



Students look at photos on display at Living Together exhibit (Jan. 25, 2011)

ST. LAURENT — St. Laurent is an extraordinarily multicultural borough, containing half of Montreal's Lebanese population along with significant numbers of Jews and other ethnic communities.

Literally half of all residents are immigrants, yet many of these communities live in relative isolation from each other, with limited interaction.

The "[Living Together](#)" project launched by the Montreal Consortium of Human Rights Advocacy and Training aims to change that.

Since October the group has brought together teenagers from five different schools so they could learn about photography, leadership and each other.

Giving students a chance to interact

Once a week students like Fatima Ezzahraa Boulmaf, Ariella Klein and Mahmoud Abdel Gawad would gather at the St. Laurent Recreational Centre and learn to live together.

For Ariella, it was her first real chance to develop friendships outside her tight-knit community.

"I've gone to Jewish school my entire life, Jewish camp and I live in a Jewish community, so... I never really get out there and experience everything," said Ariella.

Fatima also grew up in St. Laurent with a sense of being removed from her neighbours.

"We're so separated that we know very little about each other," she said. "As an Arab and living in an Arab community we don't mix at all with the Jewish community."

Every Tuesday, under the leadership of Amanda Tetrault, a professional photographer who produced the book "Phil and Me," the group would bring in photographs they had taken in the past week and share them.

Working in a personal manner

Fatima took pictures of her younger brother, Mahmoud took photos of his prayer book, while Ariella captured a school assembly.

"The photo exhibit is really about their sharing themselves with each other in a very personal way, and it's about our, as a group, seeing what we have in common," said Tetrault.

In the process, the 16 children learned they have much in common.

"It's a very good experience. I never thought I can have a good relation with them and it's real nice," said Mahmoud.

"I actually have a lot of people's phone numbers, and stuff and we talk," said Ariella.

Arab and Jewish leaders came up with the idea for the project and arranged for support from McGill university with the support of other community groups in St. Laurent.

The photo exhibit on display at the St. Laurent recreational centre is scheduled to end this week, but the weekly meetings will continue until May, and by all accounts the combination has successfully managed to create a positive and bridging experience in the neighbourhood.