



PHOTOS: JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE

Rachel Merovitz (right) and Fatima Boulmalf dismantle a photo exhibition at a St. Laurent cultural centre that was part of the Living Together project, set up to bring young leaders from the Arab and Jewish communities together. They meet weekly and are working on deconstructing stereotypes.

'LIVING TOGETHER' St. Laurent teens tackle stereotypes and prejudice

Muslims, Jews leap past barriers

KAREN SEIDMAN
THE GAZETTE

They came, Jewish and Muslim teens from English and French backgrounds, to meet and discover for themselves what keeps them apart.

Many of them live in the same community, but never meet or mingle with the other group. Each group has been somewhat fearful of the other.

To hear them tell it, what's been keeping them apart is hearsay, misconceptions and stereotypes.

So now, in the fourth month of the Living Together project going on weekly in St. Laurent, these students, eight Jewish and eight Muslim, focus on what they have in common.

And there is a lot.

Facebook, cellphones, TV shows, movies, music and yes, even chips. They are teenagers, after all, and they are just as likely to be concerned with acne as Middle East affairs.

The students, in Grades 10 and 11, are mainly from schools in St. Laurent: Herzliah, École Jeunes Musulmans Canadiens, Lauren Hill Academy, École secondaire St. Laurent and Bialik High School in Côte St. Luc.

They meet every Tuesday after school at the St. Laurent recreation centre.

"This was a way to bring the communities together in a positive way and to find commonality," said Amanda Tétrault, co-ordinator of the Living Together project, a collaboration between McGill University's Montreal Consortium for Human Rights Advocacy and Training, the St. Laurent borough and the YMCA St. Laurent.

"It gives them the opportunity to deconstruct stereotypes," Tétrault said.

The project is guided by an advisory board of leaders from both the



Project co-ordinator Amanda Tétrault speaks with participants and youth co-ordinators in the Living Together project.

Jewish and Arab communities and will continue until May.

The idea originated from a request by the Arab and Jewish communities. The original idea got some seed money from the Jewish Community Foundation, which later resulted in a grant from the Education Department. After a year and a half of planning, the program finally began last fall. While it is a pilot project now, Tétrault hopes it will become an annual occurrence.

The first project together was a

photography exhibit. Now the teens will work together on a bigger project to create something positive for the borough of St. Laurent. But the program is not so much about the finished product than the journey.

So what was it like at the first meeting between Jewish and Muslim students?

"A bit awkward," admitted Laura Regev, one of the project's youth co-ordinators. "But the students were curious and motivated to find out about each other."

And they quickly found there was more that united them than divided them. In fact, language was probably a bigger barrier than anything cultural, Regev said.

"We're all just kids and we like the same things," said Rachel Merovitz, a Grade 10 student at Herzliah High School. "Just because we have different backgrounds doesn't mean we're different."

Mahmoud Abdel-Gawad, a Grade 10 student at École Jeunes Musulmans Canadiens, said he had never had any interaction with Jews before.

"I heard many stereotypes, but I never had any occasion to speak to anyone Jewish," he said. "Now I realize the stereotypes were false and we have a lot in common."

The students chat on Facebook and BBM each other, and have no shortage of things to talk about. Many say they have made real friendships which they expect to last. Rachel, for example, found she had much in common with Fatima Boulmalf. Fatima lived in Morocco for a while, which is where Rachel's mother is from, and they both have an interest in women's rights.

Brandon Smart, a Grade 11 student at Bialik, said it has been fun "meeting kids I would never otherwise meet" and discovering they all liked doing the same things.

Fatima said the two groups tend to stay away from each other because they think they're different.

"In fact, we are so similar," she said. "We are all scared of the unknown and that's why this has been so beneficial. I won't be scared to have Jewish friends any more."

To read an account of the students' experiences, go to www.vivreensemble-livingtogether.blogspot.com

kseidman@montrealgazette.com