ARTSBRIDGE, INC.
Using art & dialogue to empower young leaders

By Debbie Nathan

Artsbridge, Inc. is a Boston-based nonprofit organization with partner sites throughout Israel, Palestine, and the USA. The goal of Artsbridge is to create a safe environment for its students, which fosters understanding, creativity, and leadership. Using art and dialogue to bring them together, Artsbridge empowers students to become leaders in the quest for a brighter future in and between their homelands. A key component to the Artsbridge model is the continuation of programming, year-round, once the students return to their home communities. Upon returning to their home communities, the Artsbridge graduates serve as peer leaders to younger students from their communities and encourage their participation in activities that promote community building, effective communication, artistic expression, English language enrichment, and respectful listening. The training received during the Artsbridge summer program enables our graduates to act as role models and mentors, thereby imparting the knowledge and ideas they learned in the summer program to these new students.

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The program started in 2007 and is supported by many foundations and individual donors. The initial focus was on peacebuilding projects, and the Artsbridge program continued to build on this work. The program has now expanded to include a range of projects, both domestic and international. These projects are designed to foster leadership, collaboration, and conflict resolution skills among young people in a variety of contexts.

PEACEBUILDING AND THE ARTS
Joining the Global Conversation

By Cynthia Cohen

In Belgrade, Serbia, courageous and creative theater artists acknowledge crimes committed in their names and take a stand against them. In the small town of Perunik, El Salvador, survivors of a massacre from both sides of the political divide commemorate their losses together while painting colorfully vibrant murals of the better future for which they yearn. In Australia, a series of small reconciliation rituals grew into a movement that led to an official apology to the “Stolen Generation,” aboriginal children forcibly taken from their families. There, and in cities all over the world, young people are building relationships across differences through the shared rhythms of hip hop. All of the arts—music, theatre, visual arts, literature, architecture, film, and more—are crafted to contribute to the creative transformation of conflict. Why? Because they engage the cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of people, helping them find ways to address the complexity of situations and help us to embrace the paradoxes that are part of any peacebuilding process. I recently completed the production phase of a major international action/research project called Acting Together on the World Stage. Performed in Belgrade, it is titled The Creative Transformation of Conflict.

Through 14 case studies, artists, community leaders, and peacebuilders explored how theatrical works and rituals contribute to peacebuilding in the midst of violent conflict, in the midst of structural violence and oppression, and in the aftermath of gross violations of human rights. These examples are drawn from every continent, including case studies from Palestine and Israel. In reviewing all 14 of the case studies, as well as interviews with artists, peacebuilders, and evaluators, we identified eight lessons from the project.

These lessons are powerful and can be crafted to contribute to the transformation of violent conflict. Peacebuilding performances have the potential to support communities to engage with painful issues and to integrate among conflicting and contradictory imperatives.