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Brighton High School Class of 2010

For my entire sophomore year of high school I was living in Jerusalem, Israel with my parents. I had come up with the idea myself to go there to learn more about the country, our religion, and the conflicts there, and my parents agreed that it would be a great experience. It certainly was. While I was there I was lucky enough to attend a meeting of an all-Arab youth group, which was very enlightening. It made me realize that they were just normal teenagers like me, and they were extremely welcoming. While in Israel, I also volunteered twice a week at a soup kitchen open to people of all nationalities and faiths.

I got back from Israel in May 2008, and then in July attended a summer program called Face to Face, Faith to Faith, run by the Auburn Seminary. This was a program for teenagers from the Middle East, Israeli and Palestinian; Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant; South Africa, colored and white; and the United States, with people from all backgrounds. It was an intensive 2-week program, and while there, we engaged in dialogues discussing the nature of the conflicts going on in countries all over the world, how they affected us, and what we could do to help. I learned so much about the conflicts that are still very active in Northern Ireland and South Africa that I had not previously known. Now, throughout the year, the Face to Face, Faith to Faith teenagers from the United States will get together three times to follow up and expand on everything that we learned while at the summer program. We have met twice already. At the first retreat we focused on change within ourselves, and on the second retreat we focused both on inherent racism that we all consciously or subconsciously had, and how we could use our privileged upbringings to make the world a better place, or, "privilege to power."

After getting back from Face to Face, I realized that I wanted to bring to my community what I had learned. I am the religious and cultural president in my youth group at Temple Sinai, and I have already written and run a program to teach my peers in my youth group about some of the human rights issues that new immigrants in Israel are facing right now. I then initiated a meeting with the presidents of a Muslim and a Christian youth group so that the three of us could work together to bring the members of each youth group together to discuss the similarities/differences between the religions, stereotypes, and our relationships to our religions and/or God as teenagers. That program occurred about two weeks ago.

The program between the three youth groups was extremely enlightening, and it was an amazing experience to be able to lead other teenagers in such an experience. The evening started out with a meal with food provided by the youth group members. There were foods ranging from at least three types of baklava, to a Pakistani lentil dish, to hamentaschen, to tater tots. The mix of tastes started the evening off with a multicultural feeling. We then proceeded to have a discussion between all the members of the youth groups. The discussion questions included, "what are some stereotypes that you already have about the three religions in this room?", "Do you think that a belief in "God" is important in order to be religious? Why or why not?", and, "How does religion affect you in your personal life?" Everyone had something to say to each one of these questions. Everyone had had interesting experiences in the airport. Both the Muslims and the Jews had been victims of racial profiling at airport security, and some of the Christians had

been put in the uncomfortable position of having someone else think that they were going to try to convert them. Having this one place in common made us see that we all have similarities.

After the program, the three youth groups have decided to keep the relationship going between them for next year. We will get together at least once a month in order to do service projects for the community, and, at the same time, get to know each other better.

These programs are extremely important because, having lived in Israel, I have seen the hate that exists between religions firsthand. After returning to Rochester, it was made more apparent to me that, although it is more subtle than in Israel, there are still tense feelings between religious groups here, especially between Jews and Muslims. The fact that the three religious youth groups will be able to come together on a regular basis in order to help the community fills me with hope for the future, and makes me feel accomplished for what has been achieved so far.

Although I know that I have lived in a sheltered suburb all my life, through these experiences I have been able to come into contact with the "real world." I have come to the conclusion that open dialogue is the only way to make progress in interfaith/interracial cooperation. Going forward, it is my lifelong commitment to continue work on peaceful communication and conflict resolution through study and action in college and beyond. I know that I can do this because I have already put into motion an interfaith youth movement in Rochester, and it has a potential to bloom into something bigger.