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 Friday May 25, 2007

Teens learn about Israel beyond religious, geographic conflicts

by **stacey palevsky**
 staff writer

Jewish.
 Palestinian.
 Violence.
 Miscommunication.
 Hummus.

This is how a group of teenagers answered the question: What words come to mind when you think about Israel?

But their responses don't exactly sound like a complete portrait of the Jewish state.

To give teens a wide-angle view into the diversity of the Jewish state, a regional chapter of the New York-based Curriculum Initiative, known as TCI, planned a daylong conference for nearly 200 Bay Area private high school students.

"Israel: Through the Lens of its Diversity," held Sunday, May 20, just barely touched upon the Israel-Palestinian land dispute, and instead focused on

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Israeli documentaries, punk music, poetry, politics, gay culture, Arab culture and peace dialogues.

“We want to help you look at a country [where the issues] are not black and white,” said Eva Orbuch to 20 students during a workshop she led called “Punk Rock, Politics and Israeli Youth.”

“We want to give you a different perspective,” the 17-year-old Marin Academy senior added.

That she did. During the hour-long workshop, she and Josh Meadow, also a Marin Academy senior, used film clips to encourage a lively debate among her peers.

The white screen that hung from the classroom wall filled with images of Mohawk haircuts, facial piercings, black eyeliner and electric guitars in “Jericho’s Echo: Punk Rock in the Holy Land,” a film by San Franciscan Liz Nord.

The students watched as Israeli punk musicians talked about how their music intersects with the constant threat of terrorism in Israel.

“You get used to it because you can’t be sad all your life,” one musician tells the camera. Another looks at his hands and

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explains, "I could get killed, everybody I love could be killed. It makes for a lot of fear inside. It sucks."

When the lights came on, Orbuch and Meadow asked the group to imagine their lives as Israeli teenagers.

"Do you go through life in fear or do you continue to do the things you love to do?" Meadow asked.

"You have to keep on living because otherwise you won't cherish what's important to you," said Niki Wemple, 15, of Redwood City.

Orbuch, Meadow and a dozen adults presented at the Sunday conference at the Menlo School in Atherton. While most of the teachers were Jewish, a majority of the students in attendance were not. TCI works with both Jewish and non-Jewish teenagers.

"I don't know that much about Israel. That's why I'm here," said Laura Torello, 15, of Millbrae.

She attended the punk rock workshop, and said although she's not into punk music, she is "into raising awareness. My big thing now is Africa and AIDS. I want to be a doctor and work there."

Educators in attendance say

learning how to understand the complexity of Israel's layers is valuable in a number of disciplines.

"I hope they go home knowing how to ask questions and remember how to engage different perspective," said Louise Grotenhuis, director of diversity at the Menlo School.

She has worked for several years with the Curriculum Initiative. The Jewish organization serves private high schools by providing students with extracurricular programming and teachers with professional development opportunities. TCI operates in four regions, including New York, Boston, Baltimore and the Bay Area.

"Though the Lens" workshops were intentionally diverse to give teens options that could make their experience more personal.

Adrian Shrek, director of TCI's western region, said that "we wanted kids to choose a workshop about something they're interested in, instead of us adults telling them what we think they should be interested in."

One workshop screened documentaries made by Israeli

teens. One workshop went into detail about the influence of Arab Jews on the Jewish state, explaining to students that Israelis and Jews are not only of European descent, but come from Arab and North African countries as well.

Adam Gaynor, who works in TCI's New York office, taught the workshop about Arab and Islamic influence on contemporary Israel. He asked students to consider questions that he couldn't answer.

"How do you define a Jew? Is it ethnic? Communal? Cultural? Religious?" he said. "These are some of the hard questions that Israel began asking when Jews from around the world began to flood into Israel."

So the next time the teens are asked to describe Israel? With what they learned on Sunday, hummus and violence should be at the bottom of the list.

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