

Why is the “Oasis of Peace” important to me?

This summer, four women from the “Oasis of Peace” spent one week discussing their lives as peacemakers and friends at the Chautauqua Institution in upstate New York. The Chautauqua Institution, founded in 1874, hosts over 142,000 visitors each summer for lectures, workshops, and public events ranging from arts to religion. Nihaya Daoud, Dafna Karta-Schwartz, Daniella Kitain, and Maram Masarwi were featured as part of Chautauqua's Religion Department's program, "Women Breaking Barriers: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow." Here are excerpts from two of the women's speeches:

Nihaya Daoud, a Palestinian resident, is a teacher and researcher at the Braun School of Public Health at the Hebrew University and Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem:

During my childhood, I almost had no relations with Jews. Arabs live in separate villages and towns. It was a dichotomy of “us and them.” It was just in WASNS that I had a real meeting with the Jews. At the beginning I was afraid. I was worried about my Palestinian identity and my culture and who I might become. I remember how I confronted everybody. I felt threatened. I slowly started to talk with my Jewish neighbors and friends around me, to listen to them and to communicate with them. I realized that they are very much like us, they have good and bad people. They are the enemy but they are also the healers of my wounds. I believe this is the essence of WASNS. Everyone in our community has his place in the puzzle. It is a place where we Palestinians and Jews live together to create a different reality that calls for peace and equality. It is the place where each side recognizes the rights of others despite previous judgments and different backgrounds. Our children go to the same binational school, they learn each other's languages and cultures, and most importantly, they are free of the prejudices that took me years to let go of. It was not a certain moment; it is a long process. Having said that, I don't want to give the impression that WASNS is only an individual or personal solution for people from individual families because we have a strong message to convey, a message of peace. I don't exaggerate when I say WASNS could even be a role model for the whole Middle East and for other communities in conflict. WASNS is the bridge between our people. WASNS is neither a dream nor utopia. It is a real thing. We face many challenges and obstacles but we are learning how to get over difficulties without violence.

Dafna Karta-Schwartz, a Jewish resident, studied alternative therapy at the Reidman International Center for Complementary Medicine and works as a therapist at the Tsabar Clinic:

I moved with my family to live in NSWAS 17 years ago. I wanted to raise my kids in this different pioneer way. I remembered the first time I visited this village. It was the first time in my life I saw children playing together in Hebrew and Arabic. In those days, I considered myself a very open minded person. I was wrong. My feelings were far away from my declaration. I was very naive. I met many barriers between me and others. I couldn't break any one of them. I was crashing into them. I was confronted with my weakness, helplessness and pain. The first year in the village was like an earthquake for me. I had never had any meetings with Palestinians on an equal level. In the village I had to be exposed to the language, culture, hatred, anger, mistrust and blame. I was shocked. I had to send my 3-year-old child to the kindergarten—to a Palestinian Muslim teacher. My mouth was saying “Yes, I have no problem with that.” But my heart was shaking. Every day brought so many questions to my life. I had to check the foundations of my identity. It was very, very hard for me to discover how many layers of fears and barriers I have inside of me—very deep layers of fear and anxiety. I discovered how I carried the life story of my parents, grandparents and my other ancestors inside myself. Some fears were connected to Arabs; many of them were connected to Jewish history and the holocaust. I know that fears are the foundations of barriers. I notice how easily I have put people in boxes giving them names and titles. My journey in the village sent me to check my childhood and the way I was raised.