

NEVE SHALOM/WAHAT AL-SALAM

Running time: 6:00

Cronkite: Some argue that Israeli Jews and Palestinians can never live together. But over 20 years ago, a group of people formed a small village to prove them wrong. Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salaam, just outside Jerusalem, is Israel's only integrated Palestinian and Jewish community. They have conflicts, they argue, they vote. Most importantly, they continue to live together. The town's accumulated experiences hold some valuable lessons for the future.

Sound: gate opens, teachers talk in Arabic, kid cries

Najjar: My name is Abdessalam Najjar, I work in public relations for this community.

[walking] Here is the kindergarten

Sound: kids playing

Najjar: We have 50 families, Jewish and Palestinians. All together we have 200 people. More than 300 families are on a waiting list.

Najjar: Music lesson, we can go there

Sound: walking into the class, teacher instructs class to get ready for song, plays keyboard

music starts: keyboard + plastic flutes

Walter: While Palestinian and Jewish elementary students in this music class mix easily, it's harder for older students. What, for example, do the middle school history classes teach about 1948? For Jews, it was the founding of Israel. Palestinians call events that year "the disaster." Najjar says that for such gaping controversies, the school divides the students into separate Jewish and Palestinian classes, each learning its own history.

Najjar: For the Jewish students they should be alone to feel independent. They shouldn't be bothered by the Palestinians celebrating it as their disaster. The same thing for the Palestinians. After these separations, they will be unified and everyone will explain to the other side their feeling.

Sound: walking on asphalt and rocky path

Student: My Name is Ruth Schuster. I have lived here 10 years. I had two small kids and I wanted to give them a better education than we have in the big cities. I was sure in Neve Shalom, they will get an education without brainwash, without racism, without hatred. I used to think of myself as a liberal woman, left, open minded. Then I realized all of these bad stereotypes I got and I heard in school and from society, from media, was deep inside of me. For example, the first time my daughter came home from school and told me she was studying the Koran. I was surprised to find myself a little bit afraid.

Walter: Najjar says both Jews and Palestinians in Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salaam struggle hard to respect one another. But it's not easy to overcome the dominant role that Jews play in the wider society.

Najjar: The dominant group has the dominant language. Here it's very easy to teach Palestinians Hebrew. For example, in primary school, Palestinian children, after 3 months, they will use Hebrew. But the Jewish, not after 3 months, not after one year and even not after 3 years they will start using the Arabic.

Walter: Despite such problems, residents have built up trust among themselves, as seen in elections for mayor and village council. When people first arrive, they tend to vote exclusively for their own nationality. In the early years, the town elected Israeli Jews as mayors. Former Mayor Riak Rizik notes that as both sides gained more confidence and trust, they voted for the best person. And in recent years, they've elected Palestinian mayors.

Najjar: So you discover the person on the other side. You begin to make your choice depending on the person. It doesn't make a difference if he is Arab or Jewish, so long as you think he's a good person, fit for the job.

Sound: walking on asphalt and rocky path

Teacher: We'll go back to our lesson. We're going to work in groups in exercise 8.

Student: I think Bill Gates is most famous. My name is Noam Benstock, 12 years old. In here we're all friends, we're all family. Most of my friends from where I live, think I'm mad because I study with Arabs. They think all Arabs are terrorists and some Arabs are going to bomb me and the others are going to celebrate on my dead body. I think they are crazy. They don't study. If you think like that, how do you suppose we can have peace?

Sound: music with plastic flutes

Cronkite: This feature was produced and written by Reese Erlich for PEACETALKS. I'm Walter Cronkite.