

## THE NON-PROFIT SPOTLIGHT

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### **American Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam**

It's a battle that many will call good versus evil, but in the end, it comes down to two large groups of people trying to coexist. And while there doesn't seem to be a political end to the Israel-Palestine conflict, peace has decided to take more inventive routes. The **American Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam** is one such path, bringing Palestinians and Israelis to live together in a democratically-run community known as the "Oasis of Peace". The "Oasis" challenges its 54 families - evenly split - to work together to confront their volatile environment, and with a waiting list of over 300 families, it seems hopeful that cooperation will be the preferred method for most people. Find out how the American Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam is working to save lives in this week's Non-Profit Spotlight.

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## resumé

### Non-Profit

American Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam

### Founded

January 1988

### Website

[www.oasisofpeace.org](http://www.oasisofpeace.org)

### Name

Deanna Armbruster, Executive Director, 36

### Hometown

Hudson, WI

### Current residence

Los Angeles, CA

## Education

BA, Augustana College, 1992 & MA, California State University-Northridge, 1999

## Other jobs / past companies

Freelance Journalist, Associated Press

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## **About the Non-profit**

The American Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam is dedicated to dialogue, cooperation, and a genuine and durable peace between Arabs and Jews, Palestinians and Israelis, by encouraging, supporting and publicizing the projects of the community of Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam, the "Oasis of Peace."

For more than twenty-five years, Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel have lived and worked together as equals in this community. The community teaches tolerance, understanding and mutual respect well beyond its own borders by being a model for peace and by reaching out through its educational institutions. A bilingual, bicultural Primary School/Junior High School serves the village and the surrounding communities. Encounter workshops conducted by the School for Peace, both in the community and beyond, have reached tens of thousands of Jewish and Palestinian youth and adults.

## **Most notable milestones / achievements**

The community of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam (NSWAS) has been nominated five times for the Nobel Peace Prize, and received the Annual UNICEF-Italy prize in 2001, the International Festival of Excellence Award (Fete d'Excellence) in 2000, and various other international prizes.

Additionally, the bilingual, binational Primary School at NSWAS was the first bilingual, bicultural school in Israel and has been a pioneer of bilingual, binational education in the region, with an administrative and teaching structure equally shared and run by Palestinians and Jews. Further, the School for Peace is an internationally renowned conflict management institution, leading the field in binational dialogue programs.

## **What's the niche?**

The "Oasis of Peace" is the only community in the region where Jews and Palestinians live together in a joint commitment to mutual respect, understanding, and equality. This democratically-run village demonstrates the possibility of peace between Palestinians and Jews and spreads this message through its educational institutions: the pioneering bilingual, binational Primary School/Junior High School (the only Junior High for Jews and Palestinians in Israel), the innovative School for Peace, and the Bruno Hussar Pluralistic Spiritual Center, which hosts interfaith dialogues and workshops.

## **What's the biggest challenge?**

The community of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam is neither a utopia nor an isolated village. Its residents interact with others in the region on a regular basis and have family living outside of the community. Many residents work in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, or other cities outside of the "Oasis of Peace," and their children attend segregated Jewish and Arab high schools (at present, the Primary School/Junior High School at NSWAS is a K-8 institution, the only bilingual, bicultural school serving this range of students). Further, most of the students at the Primary School/Junior High School and all of the participants at the School for Peace come from various communities in Israel and Palestine. Thus, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-

Salam is subject to the same impacts and effects of the conflict as are their neighbors in other villages, towns, and cities. In some ways, living in this kind of environment can be more challenging because NSWAS residents—both Jews and Palestinians—must determine together how to handle and confront the difficult events that occur outside the village, rather than ignoring and/or avoiding one another. Surprisingly, outside violence often brings the community closer together.

For example, after the beginning of the second intifada, the village founded the Humanitarian Aid for Palestinians program to assist their Palestinian neighbors in the West Bank. This program brings important medical kits to communities in need, coordinates medical days where Jewish and Palestinian doctors treat patients in villages that have limited access to medical facilities, and arranges for medical treatment in Israeli hospitals for Palestinians (primarily children) with severe medical conditions. This type of response demonstrates the positive impact and problem-solving capacity that can be achieved through a binational commitment to peace and equality.



### **What's in store for the future?**

Currently, 54 families – half Jewish, half Palestinian – live in the “Oasis of Peace.” Another 19 families are in the process of building homes and moving into the village in the coming years. Additionally, 300 more families are on a waiting list to join the community. The community and its programs will continue growing in the future. The community hopes to continue spreading its message of mutual understanding and respect through dialogue to a more and more Israelis and Palestinians through its educational programs. The Primary School has already grown extensively in recent years and has been the subject of many research initiatives to study the impact of bilingual, bicultural education. The school is working on engaging in additional curriculum development projects and other activities to improve Arabic among Jewish students and teachers and expand its extracurricular activities. The School for Peace is also working to expand its reach now and in the future by offering dialogue and facilitator training workshops that target various professional sectors in both Palestine and Israel. Finally, the Bruno Hussar Pluralistic Spiritual Center recently held an opening ceremony and will be focusing on reconciliation programs in the coming years.

### **Who would you like to be contacted by?**

Individuals or organizations that are also committed to peace in the Middle East, particularly those interested in programs that bring Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians together to foster understanding and build bridges between them.

## **NON-PROFIT PHILOSOPHY**

### **Guiding principle of the organization**

The American Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam is guided by its commitment to dialogue, cooperation, and a genuine and durable peace between Jews and Palestinians. We believe that opportunities that bring the two sides together in meaningful dialogue and educational settings can have a positive impact on fostering the type of relationships necessary to build a foundation for peace.



### **Yardstick of success**

The success of the organization is measured by the impact it can make in reaching people and telling the powerful story of Jews and Palestinians, Israelis and Arabs living, working and raising their children together. Given the organization's commitment to building equality and cooperation, supporting and spreading the message of a community where people are fully living their life in this way is significant.

### **Goal yet to be achieved**

Supporting the community of the "Oasis of Peace" requires a large vision with long-term hope for a future, where peace becomes a reality. The community offers inspiration for continued efforts toward peace in the region.

### **Best practical advice**

Working at a grassroots level – one by one, person by person – is as powerful and important as any other efforts for peace. Grassroots efforts can and will create viable change.



### **Supportive words from a family member or friend on your venture**

To work for peace in the region is to believe that peace is possible.

## **Mentor**

The residents of the "Oasis of Peace" serve as a mentor for me. If they can live together in peace and equality and sacrifice a great deal for this different reality, then I can continue my work to be a source of support for them.

## **TRUE CONFESSIONS**

### **What motivated the people who started the organization?**

The founders of the American Friends of NSWAS were inspired by the possibility of bringing people in conflict together based on a shared commitment to equality, mutual respect and building understanding.

### **What keeps your organization motivated today?**

The village itself keeps us motivated, and the belief that this community and its work can make a difference in the region, a tangible difference.

### **What do people in the organization like best about it?**

The children and young people in the village are one of the things we like best about the organization. They demonstrate the possibility and hope for the future through our work.

### **What do people in the organization like least about it?**

Because of the controversy that the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can evoke and that there are many people who do not respect one another or want to see one another as equals, the work can be very challenging.

### **Biggest pastime outside of work for most people in your organization**

Travel and a passion for animals

### **Person most interested in meeting that would be beneficial for your organization**

We are not interested in meeting any single person, but rather in meeting lots and lots of people interested in spreading the message of the "Oasis of Peace." Change can only be created through this type of critical mass. It takes more than politicians or celebrities or single significant funders, it takes many, many people to support our mission.

### **Three interesting facts about the organization**

1. The Board of Directors of the American Friends of NSWAS is also balanced, like the village itself.
2. We receive a significant amount of support from individuals who are not Jewish, Arab or Muslim, but are still concerned and passionate individuals seeking peace between Israelis and Arabs.
3. The "Oasis of Peace" is the only community where members of groups in conflict are living together in a commitment to peace and equality.

### **Three characteristics that best describe the organization**

1. The equal balance of Jews and Arabs in the village and in all of its educational programs is a key characteristic of the organization.
2. A sustained commitment to dialogue and communication, regardless of the tension surrounding the community is another key characteristic.

3. The community is a tangible example that peace is possible between Jews and Palestinians.

**Favorite cause (outside of yours)**

Social and Environmental Justice

*If you would like to contact Deanna, you can reach her at [deanna@oasisofpeace.org](mailto:deanna@oasisofpeace.org).*