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A message from the 'Oasis of Peace'

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By Jim Read, *Staff writer*

For the residents of the Israeli village of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, finding ways for Jews and Palestinians to live in peace comes down to neighborly negotiations.

The Israeli village, located halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, is home to 53 families. Half are Jewish and half are Palestinian.

All agree about the need for equality, said Abdessalam Najjar, the community's mayor. But before residents can talk about equality, it first must be decided whether the discussion will be in Arabic or Hebrew, he said.

Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, translated from Hebrew and Arabic means "Oasis of Peace." The village was founded in the 1970s by a Catholic priest who wanted to bring Palestinians and Jews together.

Najjar and Michal Zak, deputy director and adult department coordinator at the village's School for Peace, spoke Monday at Manlius Pebble Hill School in DeWitt. They are on an 11-day tour of the Northeast, discussing the work of the village.

Today they will meet with MPH students and speak at the Muslim-Jewish dinner at Winnick/Hillel House at Syracuse University. Both events are private. They will give a public talk at 7:30 p.m. to residents of The Oaks at Menorah Park, 18 Arbor Lane, Syracuse.

Najjar said the community strives to provide a climate where Jews and Arabs can work out differences and provide education through the bilingual, bicultural primary/junior high school and the School for Peace. The village also provides a spiritual life for all residents.

Living in the village helps residents understand how they can change their behaviors, Najjar said. "We realize goodwill is not enough," he said.

Zak said the Jewish majority in Israel tends to dehumanize the Arab population. "It's so built into Israeli culture, you grow up not being aware of it," she said. "We are trying to . . . break that cycle of dehumanization."

Those barriers are broken down by education. More than 35,000 have trained at the School for Peace, a research and training center for conflict management. The community's primary and junior high school has about 300 students engaged in a bilingual, bicultural education program. Most of the students come from outside the village.

The graduates of the two schools and the work they do are the village's legacy, Najjar said. "Our work is important, but it won't bring peace," he said. "We are only making seeds."