

Young camper learns about peace

Christian,
Jewish,
Muslim
children get
along

Shortly after he arrived at summer camp in Huntsville in August, Kobe Harrigan climbed to the top of a 20-foot pole and jumped off. He was wearing a harness and the other kids were holding onto the end of the rope so he wouldn't hit the ground. "The point was to build trust and say that we are doing something new and life-changing," says the seventh-grader, who is a member of St. David, Lawrence Ave. "We are taking a jump."

The exercise, called the Leap of Life, is a standard part of Outward Bound's camp experience, but for the children in Kobe's group, it had an added significance. They were part of Kids4Peace, a peace initiative of St. George's College in Jerusalem and the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which brings together Jewish, Christian, and Muslim children from Israel and Palestine with their counterparts in Canada.

The program focuses on children who are 11 years old. "I think they chose us at this age because this is around the age when our beliefs start to get more solid, and we believe a lot of things that probably aren't very good if you want to understand other people," explains Kobe, who turned 12 in October. He says the purpose of the program is to teach kids that "We are not all that different. Every kid has some similarities. We all enjoy playing with our friends, or going to school and learning."

Kobe was recommended for the program by the Rev. Canon James Garland, the interim priest-in-charge at St. David's, where Kobe is a reader and a server-in-training. "As soon as I saw a CBC mini doc about Kids4Peace three years ago, I knew that Kobe was a perfect fit," says Canon Garland. "But when we inquired, he was too young, so we waited. Kobe is bright, intelligent and inquisitive. He thinks for himself, comes to his own conclusions and keeps on reading and finding out more than most adults. He is also very tolerant and respects others."

In Huntsville, Kobe met 12 boys and girls from Israel and Palestine, as well as 11 Canadian children. Much of each day was spent in typical summer camp activities. "For three days and two nights, we went hiking and we canoeed across Lake Kernick," he says. "We stayed in tents with our counselors. It was fun but our

OUR LIVES

By HENRIETA PAUKOV

Our Lives features inspiring stories of the clergy and laypeople among us. This month, The Anglican talks to Kobe Harrigan.

tents got flooded. It rained a lot."

He also learned to swim. "We took him to lessons [at home] but he wasn't interested in learning, but there he picked it up in a week," says his Dad, Edwin Harrigan. "Actually, I picked it up in three days," says Kobe.

Besides the outdoorsy stuff, the kids also learned about each other. "Every day, we would sit in a big room in the lodge and learn about each other's cultures and do different exercises," says Kobe. "One of them was putting on a play based on a religious holiday and the story of that holiday. Another was drawing a symbol that means something in your religion, like a cross or a dove. We also had three services, one for each religion. We learned a lot about each other and about what goes on everywhere else."

He tried challah bread for the first time and learned about its significance to Jews. "They break bread, but instead of having a wafer like in the Christian services, they break the challah bread," he says. "It's a lot bigger. We all got to make one." He says he learned that "we all share similar stories about what happened in ancient times and we all have very similar religions. We worship one God, we all have Abraham and at one point or another, a prophet told someone to write a scripture about what God had said."



Kobe Harrigan

The kids all got along, Kobe reports, and the only arguments were over "unimportant things like whether dinosaurs existed or not. I said that we have fossils to prove that dinosaurs existed, and one boy said that the fossils could be made of plaster and nothing but plaster." And did Kobe win that argument? "It never got finished," he says with a smile.

When the children returned to Toronto, they held a play for their parents called Abraham's Tent. "Abraham is one of the common links between the three religions," explains Kobe. "Somewhere in all of the religious scriptures, there is a part about Abraham, and his sons and daughters. So we did one play for each religion about some important event where Abraham's descendants played a major part. The Jewish kids and the Jewish instructors put on a play about when the Jews came out of Egypt, the Christians did the Christmas story, and the Muslims did a play about when Abraham had to leave Hagar and her son in the desert."

After the play, each Canadian

child took home an Israeli or Palestinian child for a few days so the visitors could experience Canadian culture. Kobe's guest was Bassel, a Christian boy from Jerusalem. "Each day we had a different field trip that we would go on with the rest of the camp," says Kobe. "We went to a baseball game, and we visited Niagara Falls and the CN Tower. We also visited each person's place of worship: a mosque, which was huge and doubled as a high school; a synagogue; and St. Paul's Church. We got a brief overview of what happens during a service and where the important places and people are."

While driving through the north end of Toronto with Kobe's family, Bassel was surprised to see familiar Arabic writing on some of the signs. From Mr. Harrigan, he learned that newcomers from many different cultures come to Toronto to make a life for themselves. But for kids like Bassel, Kids4Peace can be a lot more than just a learning experience. Sometimes it's a brief respite from a grim reality.

"A couple of years ago, one of the children came from an area that had been bombed," says Kobe's Mom, Eleanor Harrigan. "When he came to the camp, he was so emotionally stressed out that he spent two days under a

table. They worked with him and tried to get him to calm down. He had brought with him a piece of the house next door, and he had it in his hand all that time. He had traveled with it. After a while he got talking and he got more involved. The parents were just very relieved that their child had been able to get away from the conflict and have that sense of peace away from all the violence. That's what it can mean to some of the children."

On the last day of the camp, Kids4Peace held a barbecue celebration to send off the kids from the Middle East. "There was a lot of tears because they formed such a bond in such a short time," says Mrs. Harrigan. Reflecting on the Kids4Peace experience, Kobe says: "I enjoyed being with new friends and doing activities that were new, things that I might not get to do during my childhood again."

But he also grappled with more serious matters. Throughout the camp, the kids were asked to reflect on the question: "What does peace smell like, taste like, look like, feel like, sound like?" Some of the responses were later read out to the parents. "I said that peace is bitter," says Kobe, "because you have to sacrifice so much to get peace for even a short time."

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