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Education Department
The Yitzhak Rabin Center for Israel Studies

From: Ann Overton, Executive Director
The Mastery Foundation

Subject: Report on visit and programs in March-April 2006

This memo serves as my report on our most recent visit and my recommendations for our visit this summer.

Our work with the Young Leaders of Rahat on this visit

On April 1st we held a six-hour follow-up session to the two-day program on Leadership we did for the Young Leaders in August 2005. There were 55 young men and women in the room, ranging in age from about 10 to 19 years old. Of the total group, we estimate that no more than a third had participated in the previous program.

We began the day with a World Café exercise. Groups of four or five were seated around small tables that had been covered in paper. One person at each table acted as the host. We gave the groups four rounds of topics or questions to discuss and packages of crayons so they could draw or diagram their discussions. Between rounds, we asked them to report on their conversations and then asked everyone but the host to move to a new table.

These are the topics or questions they discussed:

1. Share an experience of good leadership. (This could be an experience of their own leadership or that of someone else.)
There was a lot of agreement that being a good leader was about being strict, disciplined, and authoritarian with others.
2. Share an experience where you made a difference as a leader.
3. Share an experience where you tried to lead and it didn't work.
Interestingly, this topic provoked a conversation at most tables about failure. Several tables reported that a good leader was one who assessed the risk and if failure seemed likely, the leader would not even try. The conclusion they made is that a good leader is someone who never fails.
4. What possibility do you see for yourself as a leader in your community?
They had some wonderful answers: this one will be a councilman, this one will lead the soccer team, and this one will lead her class.

After lunch, we kept them in small groups at the tables, but shifted the conversation to begin working with some of the distinctions of leadership we taught them in the summer program. For these discussions, they did not change tables but stayed with the same small group.

First we asked each table to pick a local situation in need of leadership. Some of them chose peer situations like getting someone to stop smoking; others chose broader community concerns such as the local council's failure to maintain good roads. We then asked each group to identify the everyday conversations about the situation. What were people saying about it, what were the stories, excuses, opinions, complaints, and gossip? We distinguish all of this as 'the swamp,' an impenetrable mass of problems and difficulties.

We then asked them to separate the facts of the situation from all the elements that made up the swamp and report on what that process was like for them. What they discovered, of course, is that first of all, it is difficult to extricate relatively neutral facts from the swamp of bias and resignation. Secondly, the list of facts tends to be much shorter and less compelling than the swamp, and tends to lead in the direction of responsibility.

The final question they discussed was: What is the possibility you are going to bring to this situation? We asked one person at each table to report this to the entire room, and we helped them rephrase answers given from a context of problem solving to a context of creating possibility and a place to stand for themselves as leaders. For example, one table addressing a situation of supporting someone who was dealing with a personal problem said, "I think the thing to do is be a friend, show them respect, and listen to what they have to say." Rephrased in the context of possibility, we would say, "As a leader, I am the possibility of friendship, respect and love."

As this happened with each group, it was very visible on the faces in the room that lights were going off for these young people. You could see them brightening as they tried on the idea that, yes, maybe I am that possibility. Even as their memory of this day fades over time, the experience of possibility changes them. So as they continue to work with Mona and with Sharon and Lihi, you can expect to see them step up and take on more responsibility for their own actions and a greater leadership role in whatever they are doing.

Other aspects of the day in Rahat

Being in Rahat gave the young people an opportunity to host us in their community, and they did a tremendous job of it.

The lunch, which was prepared by one woman for 75 people, was served in our meeting room. The young people self-organized to put all the tables together so we could eat family style, and they managed the clean up and re-setting of the room so that it seemed almost effortless.

Several of those who participated in the summer also took on a major role (without being asked) in keeping order in the room during the working sessions. This was a great demonstration of leadership which made our job easier and which we particularly appreciated.

The young people are justifiably proud of their culture and organized a special program to share it with us. Several of the young women did a fashion show of Bedouin women's dress that was stunningly beautiful. And a group of young men exhausted themselves in a spectacular display of traditional Bedouin dancing. This was followed by a very touching presentation of gift cards for each of the visitors along with speeches of gratitude for what they are learning from us.

A member of Rahat city council attended the entire day, listening to everything the group did. At the close of the day, he presented us with a lovely tray as a gift from the city. He also made a point of letting the young people, who had criticized the council, know he had heard what they said and took it seriously. He then shared with everyone that in his experience, there is no such thing as being a leader without taking risks or without failing. He said, "The reason I am a successful leader in this community is because I do take risks and I am willing to fail." It was a brilliant demonstration and lesson, and all the more meaningful because it came from him and not from us.

And then, before we could leave Rahat, we were taken to a farm on the edge of the city where they prepared tea and coffee for us in the traditional way, roasting the coffee beans on the open fire in a tent. It was a wonderful end to a great day. We came away feeling privileged to know and work with these young people in this community.

Some Conclusions

- This program for the Young People of Rahat sponsored and supported by the Rabin Center is a brilliant example of a relatively small investment that will generate enormous returns in the future. There is no time in life when your peer group is more influential or formative than it is during these years. Exposing them now to an experience (and not just the concepts) of leadership, engagement, responsibility, and citizenship creates new possibilities for them and for the future of Israel.
- It was good for the Young Leaders and for us to visit and work with them in Rahat, particularly since our previous program was conducted in Tel Aviv. They were clearly honored to have us as guests in their hometown, and they used the opportunity to show us their hospitality, share their culture, and express their appreciation and affection for us.
- Continuity is always going to be an issue with a group like this. Many of those we worked with last summer had gone away to school or graduated from the Young Leader program. The positive aspect of this is how much the new members had already absorbed from those who had participated in the summer, so it was possible to work with the whole group with minimal review of the previous material.

- The work done by Mona and Mahmoud and your ongoing program with Sharon and Lihi as facilitators is working wonders with these young people. They really do see themselves as leaders, and they openly express their enthusiasm, their energy, and their hunger for new ideas. They want to learn, they want to contribute, they are open to new ideas and challenges, and they are very teachable.
- Sharon told us there had been some problems keeping young women in the program because their parents are uncomfortable with their daughters spending so much time in mixed company. We propose that we use some of our time in this year's summer session to have a "women only" conversation about leadership challenges that are unique to women.
- Sharon also said he felt he had received as much or more than the young people from last summer's program. He has been using what we taught in his teaching and his work with the kids. This points up to us how valuable these distinctions are in leadership and effective communication, as well as how important it is to get them into the hands of a greater number of teachers and facilitators.
- This was the first time we used microphones, and that made a major difference in keeping order and holding everyone's attention.
- Our translator, Maha (and her husband, Jamal, who joined us in Rahat), make it possible for us to work with this group in their first language, Arabic. Two translators also make it possible for us to be better informed of what is happening in each small group. Because this is so important, we plan to work on developing a larger team of Arabic translators we can call on.

Program for Rahat Young Leaders this summer

Sharon has confirmed that this summer's program can be held beginning July 23rd. Since our group will need to return to the States by July 28th, any days between July 23 and 27 will work for us.

As you told us, the Rabin Center is trying to involve these young people in community work as volunteers. We will design a program to support and empower them in taking on and being responsible for projects and small groups and how to be effective as part of a community.

The Reali School Project

It was very interesting to attend the meeting at the Reali School in Haifa on March 30th with their coordinator and the project leaders from the Abusnan, El Mujales, and El Jidede schools.

As I understand it, these three schools each have projects underway to teach students the values of citizenship and democracy as well as what they called education for peace. Our group was particularly impressed with the film making project and with the two teachers from the Arab schools.

While the group leaders were interested in what the Mastery Foundation might offer, there was not enough time to discuss this in detail. My recommendation is that you convene a one-day meeting when we are in Israel this summer, and that we use that time to explore with the key teachers and facilitators how to create a program that would empower what they are already doing.

Because we know the tools and distinctions we teach are so effective when taught to these key leaders (as Sharon told us about himself), it would be a shame not to work with them. But we need a day or afternoon with them first to enroll them in this. Just as with the students, their engagement and interest in our program is a critical part of having it be successful. Once they are enrolled, there is no doubt about the value it would provide in ensuring the success of their own projects.

As always, it is a pleasure to work with you and the staff at the Rabin Center. Your work, teaching that the principles of social equality and respect for the individual within a community are the foundation of democracy, is the real and difficult work of peace building and of creating a new future. We are honored to be your partners in this and look forward to continuing to work with you this summer and in the future.

