

LAU conflict-resolution workshop affords students peace-building skills

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Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A group of university students from across Lebanon gathered in Jbeil from August 16-25 to attend a 10-day workshop on conflict resolution. The Summer School on Conflict Prevention and Transformation, which was founded in 2004 by the Institute of Peace and Education at the Lebanese American University, takes place every August at the Jbeil campus.

"The aim of the summer school," says institute director Irma Ghosn, "is to provide future leaders with the skills and tools to be peace-builders in their respective communities."

Throughout the workshop, students practice their communication skills while keeping a reflective journal. Students present a project proposal for improving Lebanese society at the end of the program. The

best project may be funded by the UNDP and other donors, and be put into action the following year.

"The curriculum incorporates academic and experiential knowledge, with students interacting in smaller and larger groups," says Zachary Metz, one of the trainers

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and an international consultant in peace-building. The trainers use simple daily encounters and local case studies, rather than political conflicts, for students to analyze the participants and dynamics of every conflict. From a petty situation such as a woman struggling with her driver to burn the red traffic light, the discussion expands on the tension between

human rights versus interests.

"Our program essentially focuses on self-reflection," explains Metz.

"We want students to think of their assumptions and reactions to a situation," the trainer adds.

Dana Sleiman, a graduate in Political Science from the American University of Beirut, described the workshop as a creative and fun way to learn. "I joined this workshop because I wanted to learn the practical, and less the academic, aspect of conflict resolution."

The workshop attempts to host Lebanese students from all religious, regional and social backgrounds. "We try as much as possible to have a balance of students from public and private institutions," says Ghosn. Applicants are selected according to work experience in community development, whether through volunteer work or dialogue sessions.

If successful, students should develop peace-building skills, and build a network of professional contacts. Alumni of the program, a quar-

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ter of which have gravitated toward peace related work, usually come back every year to share their experiences with the beginners.

"We are adding to a culture of peace which already exists in Lebanon," says Jane Docherty, a trainer and scholar of peace-building. Over the years, Docherty has noticed that Lebanese students are increasingly aware of conflict resolutions methods, which proves the existence of multiple trainings given by local and international NGOs around the country.

Unlike the majority of such programs, classes, dorms and lunches are paid for by generous donors. But all extra expenses are covered by the students, who are required to live in the LAU dorms during the workshop as it enriches the experience.

"It's an ideal location," says Ghosn. "The facilities are excellent and we are far away from the chaos of Beirut." Participants are therefore removed from their comfort zones, according to organizers, thus providing them with the opportunity to apply their newly found skills and to interact with students holding diverging views.