

Kids4Peace Boston brings three religions together

by [Caroline Kelly](#)

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Peggy Stevens, founder of the Boston chapter of Kids4Peace, stands next to a lake at Camp Merrowvista where campers swim in the summer in Center Tuftonboro, New Hampshire. Kids4Peace Boston gathers Jewish, Muslim, and Christian children together to foster friendships and learning across religion and culture. Photo by Ann Hermes/The Christian Science Monitor

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) Peggy Stevens is thinking ahead to a trip to Canobie Lake Park, the amusement park she is taking her Kids4Peace Boston brood to the next day.

“Basically, it’s from 8 o’clock in the morning to 8 o’clock at night,” she said, laughing. “And I can’t wait! They’re really wonderful to be with, and I’m excited.”

With her flashing bright eyes, and the constant cluster of children around her, Stevens is almost like Mother Ginger from *The Nutcracker*—that is, a Christian Mother Ginger who can recite a Jewish bread blessing and who looks forward to the *iftar* dinners that end the daily fast during Ramadan.

Stevens is the founder of Kids4Peace Boston, the Boston chapter of Kids4Peace International. Begun in Jerusalem in 2002, the nonprofit group runs centers in several U.S. cities. The Boston center operates an interfaith summer exchange camp

that brings together 12-year-olds of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths from Israel and the Palestinian territories with those from the Boston area to promote dialogue and leadership skill-building.

The participants spend a week at Camp Merrowvista in Center Tuftonboro, New Hampshire, and then a week in Boston learning about interfaith communication.

The idea to open Kids4Peace Boston emerged after Stevens took a trip to Jerusalem.

“I had never done something that was explicitly about peace,” she said. “But it just seemed like something I should do because I could, and it seemed so important.”

Stevens had no particular ties to the Middle East. She had worked in education since graduating from college. But when she traveled to Jerusalem in 2009 with her interfaith book group, Daughters of Abraham, she repeatedly came in contact with Kids4Peace International. Its participants or employees seemed to be everywhere she went. They told her about the revolutionary impact of their programs, as well as the challenges they faced because of a lack of space and resources.

Stevens realized she had experience as diversity coordinator for Camp Merrowvista. So along with some Daughters of Abraham friends she began a two-year process of starting a chapter of the charitable organization.

Fundraising loomed large—it costs about \$1,500 to bring each Israeli or Palestinian child to the United States. And a sliding-scale payment plan for the Boston kids, needed to foster diversity and include low-income students, meant that many of their costs needed to be covered as well.

But in 2011, after having contact with their Peace Pals—pen pals arranged by the organization—the first set of campers finally met face to face.

The hands-on activities have an underlying message of interfaith understanding. In one activity the children are given canoes, logs, ropes, paddles, and life jackets and asked to build a raft. They talk about the story of Noah building his ark, which appears in all three religious texts, before working on their project. Afterward, the students discuss their challenges in cooperating to build the raft. And those who are successful discover, when they reach it, that the canoe moored in the middle of the lake is full of candy.

“You can talk about learning to get along and what do you do when you have trouble deciding . . . or you can build a raft,” Stevens said. “It’s a camp activity, but it’s a Kids4Peace lesson, a lesson that teaches not only about religion but how do you get along with people. How do you solve problems? How do you listen to one another?”

After a successful summer program, the campers wanted to continue their contact.

The Boston children met for informal bowling trips, but that soon gave way to regular meetings each month that included participants from past years.

Stevens plans to extend the program through high school, talking about how the world looks in the U.S. compared with how it looks to children in Israel and the Palestinian territories, who may have daily contact with violence.

None of the Israeli or Palestinian children had to drop out of this year’s program, despite the violence in the Gaza region. Although Stevens and her team anticipated that the Israeli and Palestinian children could be affected by the events, “this isn’t the first time” violence has shaken the group, she said.

“If anything it just shows more desire for peace,” she said. “This time people are more determined because [the news coverage] was so focused on the killing of children and teenagers. . . . It makes our work more important than ever.”

The program seems to have been nearly as influential for the parents, who were “this group of people who were really different and didn’t know each other,” said Julie Dalton. “So as a group we agreed that . . . we could ask each other anything we wanted.”

Her daughter, Chaney, participated in the 2013 program. Later, Chaney’s class at school discussed Islam.

“She understood so much about it that the teacher just turned it over and let her take it from there,” Dalton said.

Debra Freed, whose daughter attended a Jewish day school, said Kids4Peace “was a way of seeing the wider world.”

Cultural ties can also come into play, as they did for Eyal Alghool, who is Palestinian-American and participated in the summer camp in 2011.

“Meeting all these people from where a lot of my family is from is pretty exciting, learning how it is back there,” he said, adding that “we’ve almost all stayed in touch just by e-mailing them and coming to these monthly events.”

This outlook warms the heart of his mother, Hannah Alghool.

“My son was becoming a young man, and I thought this particular place and time would brighten his eyes,” she said. “I don’t want to start on the path of ‘they’re my enemy.’ . . . It’s time to put peace in front of us.”

She served her homemade Palestinian dish of chicken and vegetables at the dinner that concludes a Kids4Peace meeting.

“The parents, the kids, the way I see them come together, it’s a wonderful feeling,” she said. “It’s a peaceful feeling. And I hope that we can pass that on to more and more generations.”