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FOCUS ON ISSUES

By Dina Kraft

JERUSALEM, Aug. 3 (JTA) -- Abdullah Awad, 15, hunches over a glowing computer screen searching for the right code to improve the interface of an E-commerce Website.

A few computers away, Miri Cohen, also 15, learns how to make a Web page's content change.

Both Abdullah and Miri are from the Jerusalem area, though he is from traditionally Arab eastern Jerusalem and she is from the western part of the city.

They live only a few miles away from each other, but it is only here, at a computer camp run and taught by students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, that Abdullah, Miri and their fellow campers -- an even split of 30 Palestinian and Israeli teenagers -- have come together.

For most, computers and top-rate instruction are the draw of this five-week camp, housed in the sleek air-conditioned computer labs and classrooms of Hebrew University's computer science department.

But for the majority of those taking part in the camp, which ends Friday, it is also the first time they are interacting with Israelis and Palestinians their own age.

"I never thought I would get to be close with Israeli kids. Now when you see us working together, it is hard to know who is an Israeli and who is an Arab," Abdullah says.

Working in small teams, speaking only in English, and executing the Java programming language they are studying every day, the initial barriers begin to break down.

All either 14 or 15, the campers troubleshoot problems, sketch out ideas, tap out code on computer keyboards and even race each other outside on a green lawn.

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The idea for the camp, which is in its first year, grew out of Yaron Binur's experiences teaching Kenyan youth computer programming as part of MIT's Africa Internet Technology Initiative.

An Israeli who is finishing his undergraduate degree at MIT, Binur felt an obligation to make a difference at home, too.

"I believe we can use technology to bridge some divides here," says Binur, who adds that the main concept behind the program is how to best use technology and education to promote coexistence and collaboration."

Looking on as the campers laugh and talk at the end of another nine-hour day of lectures and programming, he muses about what the experience will give them.

The camp is a pilot project he, his sister and a friend, Assaf Harlap, have established as part of a larger program they call MEET, or Middle East Education Through Technology.

There are plans for the teenagers to continue meeting throughout the school year as they work on projects they started at camp.

Next year they hope to expand the camp to include an advanced course in Java for this year's campers and two more beginning classes.

Israeli high-tech employees are planning to mentor the children throughout the year on projects ranging from IM networks that can translate between Hebrew and Arabic to the E-commerce Web site for Israeli and Palestinian companies.

At the camp, instructors try to impress on the teens that what they learn this summer is key to their future professional development in a technological world where the language is team work, English and regional cooperation.

"I'm sure not all of them are going to be best friends, but I think we have broken down a lot of misconceptions," Binur says.

"So they can see it is possible to work with the other side, that it is possible to find compromise."

Cohen, who lives in the leafy Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Hakerem and loves math and science, says she came to the camp looking for friends and experience in computer programming.

"It's been a really powerful experience," she explains, saying it is the first time she has had Palestinian friends.

“We feel the same emotions, thoughts. Some things in our cultures are different but mostly we are similar,” she says.

Miri says politics only rarely comes up in conversation. Usually they talk about computers, school -- and what they do on the weekends.

But when politics does emerge, things suddenly go tense, she says. Miri recalls an argument the previous day between a Palestinian girl who insisted on referring to Israel as Palestine and two Israeli boys who spoke out in protest.

Max Goldman, one of the camp's instructors, says he is not surprised politics occasionally emerges.

“It should come up. It would be ridiculous if it didn't come up,” says Goldman, who graduated this spring from MIT. But it is the coming together of the campers that most moves him.

“On the first day, the splits were very clear and now the splits are not so clear,” he says, rattling off a list of who is friends with whom and who is working together.

The campers attend camp for free; their tuition and the program itself is funded by MIT's computer science department, Israeli high tech companies, Germany's Daimler-Chrysler, and individual Jewish donors from the United States and Britain.

The Hebrew University has donated the use of their computers and classroom and lab space.

In addition to lectures on Java and tutorials with instructors, campers have also gone on field trips to Intel's offices in Israel, the Technion -- Israeli Institute of Technology in Haifa and the national science museum.

Sima Hindiyeh, 14, from the eastern Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Hanina, looks intently at the computer screen while typing in HTML text to create a personal home page.

She says she hopes maybe it will be technology that will bring peace to the Middle East.

“Maybe one day we will have a program that will help bring peace,” she says.

“Maybe a person will make such a program, maybe that person will be me.” She claps her hands at the thought.

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