

# EDUCATION UPDATE ONLINE

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## **AIFL Fosters International Unity Among Youth**

By Liza Young

With information about nations around the world just a mouse click away, misconceptions still abound with respect to the nature of different cultures and nations. In addition to working towards debunking cultural stereotypes, the America Israel Friendship League (AIFL)—created in 1971 to bolster the bond between the two democracies—has been fostering its mission of cultural exchange and understanding between youngsters of the US and Israel through its Youth Exchange program, created in 1977. The program lays the groundwork for a foundation of unity and a formula for peace. As stated by Kenneth Bialkin, President and Chairman of the Board of the AIFL, in describing the struggle against the refusal of Islamic states to accept the existence of Israel stated, “Based on this experience you will join that army of freedom.”

Last year for the first time Russian youth were invited to participate in the AIFL youth exchange program while efforts are currently being made to expand the program to a trilateral exchange program, where Russia would serve as a host country for Israeli and American students.

At the recent High School Youth Ambassador Student Exchange Program Luncheon at the AIFL headquarters in New York, the room was filled with a melody of languages and the internationally understood sounds of Beethoven’s moonlight sonata and jazz tunes, as student participants performed informally on the piano located in a corner of the meeting room.

Dr. Charlotte Frank, Chair of the Executive Committee, highlighting the common bonds of youth in the room stated, “looking around you can’t tell who’s from Moscow or who’s from Israel.”

Student participants articulately summed up what they garnered from the program during the first running two weeks.

There was resounding agreement among participants that the leadership workshops which took place in Washington, D.C. was enriching and of practical value. Israeli participant Inbar Levi of Rishon Le’Zion enthusiastically stated that she is looking forward to applying the leadership skills she learned to future experiences.

Jack Douglass Jessop of Montana—from a relatively culturally homogeneous town of only 8,000 stated, “I learned not only not to perpetuate stereotypes, but stopping others from perpetuating them.” He participated in the program through the American Israel Friendship League Regional Outreach program, which aims to reach communities across the United States.

The general consensus among students was that the program provides the opportunity to learn more during three weeks at the program than during all of high school.

Marina Geletko, an English studies high school teacher in Moscow, who is chaperoning the trip for the second year in a row, valued the leadership workshop programs that took place in Washington, D.C., for the “opportunity they give students to learn how to understand themselves and share ideas with others.” Her colleague, Natalya Sukhorukova similarly expressed her appreciation of the program for the communication and analytical skills it fosters. Both teachers are looking forward to welcoming students to Moscow as a host country and giving students a tour of Russia’s historical and cultural sites, including the Kremlin and Red Square.

William Behrer, III—Chief Operating Officer of AIFL—who students informally call Bill, pointed out that while at last year’s luncheon students were teary eyed at saying farewell, this year students were exuberant as they prepared to embark on a journey to Israel. In

addition to forging ahead with the trilateral union, Behrer stated that he envisions the future of the program as including more Americans; efforts are currently being made to further target Western portions of the United States. “It’s important to reach into communities like Jack’s in Montana, who need to understand the relationship between our two countries,” stated Behrer.

The AIFL truly accomplishes its mission of ensuring a strong future for democracy and freedom.#