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## Local progressives step beyond 'normal boundaries'

by **stacey palevsky**  
staff writer

[Gabriel Hernandez](#) spent years protesting against Israel and supporting Palestinian rights. The Berkeley man traveled to numerous Arab countries, but never to Israel.

Until this year.

Hernandez made his first trip last month with 11 Bay Area progressives, all traveling as part of a mission with the America-Israel Friendship League.

"There's no doubt that I'll be criticized for having gone, and developing this kind of relationship, because in the circles I run with, Zionist is a bad word," Hernandez said.

"But this is exactly what I need to be doing — stepping out of my normal boundaries. I'm more convinced now that peace can happen. I've seen real examples. I can tell people, 'It's there, I've been there and I've seen it,'" said

Hernandez, a youth and labor rights organizer and member of the National Chicano Human Rights Council.

Several participants were unlikely candidates for a mission to Israel, including two from the [San Francisco](#) Unified School District Board of Education, President Mark Sanchez and Jane Kim, both of whom are elected Green Party officials.

Although the trip was the first of its kind, the idea was born in 2006, shortly after the Green Party announced a resolution divesting from and boycotting Israel for its treatment of Palestinians. So Wendy Kenin, an [Orthodox Jew](#) from Berkeley, director of the S.F. chapter of AIFL and a Green voter, approached Sanchez with an idea.

"I told him, 'I'm Green, I think this boycott doesn't make sense and we need to connect people,'" she recalled.

Sanchez liked the youth cultural exchange AIFL organizes annually in the S.F. public schools. He suggested organizing a trip for progressives and people who work with [at-risk youth](#), and showing them coexistence and violence prevention efforts in Israel.

"The whole idea was for people to meet their Israeli counterparts, to learn about initiatives in Israel being used to bring people together and to apply those models in ways that could benefit the Bay Area," Kenin said.

Highlights of the 10-day trip included visits to Neve Shalom, a

village jointly established by Jewish and [Palestinian Arab](#) citizens of Israel; Atidim, a national organization that aims to close the socioeconomic gap in Israel's periphery by creating equal educational opportunities; and Yemin Orde Wingate Youth Village, a residential school near Haifa that educates and empowers hundreds of immigrant, disadvantaged and at-risk youth.

Kim called the trip "illuminating." Before being elected to the S.F. Board of Education, she worked for six years with at-risk youth in Chinatown. While there, she came to understand that the biggest challenge in providing support services to at-risk children and teens is just getting them in the door.

Kim was especially impressed by a visit to a 24-hour café in Jerusalem that provides an entry point to social services for at-risk teens. "A lot of young people come through, and since the café staff are all social workers, they develop a relationship with the young people until finally they've established enough trust to get them the services and counseling they may need to get back on track," she said. "It's an amazing way to reach out to young people."

[Bay Area participants](#) said they hope to continue sharing best practices with the Israeli educators and social workers they met during their visit.

"It was amazing to see how the adult staff at the Wingate Youth Village build community and work

with young people who have been through so much and have seen so much violence,” Kim said. She hopes to bring the director of Yemin Orde to San [Francisco](#) to conduct trainings with teachers and principals.

Kenin said she'd like to make the mission annual, but without local support and funding (AIFL's national office paid for the trip), she doesn't think that will be possible. Still, she has been encouraged by the participants' positive reactions upon returning to the Bay Area.

Moreover, Kenin hopes other Jewish agencies are impressed. When she was planning the mission, a Jewish organization phoned her, afraid the trip — populated with so many left-wingers — would backfire. She assured them there was no need to be concerned.

“This trip was really about people-to-people connections,” Kenin said. “[Hearing people](#)'s stories is what breaks down all walls.”

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