

**H**ow can I best summarize my Hands of Peace experience in a short blog post? My journey with Hands of Peace began as a Hand in 2015 and as an XL in 2016. Through my participation in the summer program, I not only challenged myself socially, but also discovered my own voice and agency advocating for community action and social change. I experienced firsthand the power that dialogue has in terms of breaking down barriers and building bridges for those brave, curious, and determined enough to take that initial leap of faith. I also formed lifelong friendships with amazing individuals through being a host family, exploring alumni programs, and travelling to Israel-Palestine.

**A**s a participant, I was grateful for the safe space Hands of Peace provided me to build trust and empathy with my peers and to explore the unknown depths of my own identity. Within the cushioned embrace of the three-week summer program, I felt free to laugh, cry, and argue as a means of exploring our shared humanity. But as an alumna, my journey was less straightforward and muddled by confusion, restlessness, and disappointment. In undergrad, I was excited to finally study environmental biology full-time in order to cultivate my childhood passion of being a wildlife conservationist. However, I grew frustrated by the absence of opportunities to pursue fruitful dialogue and to continue the many conversations left unfinished after the Hands of Peace summer program.

**N**evertheless, I continued to seek out experiences where I could meet like-minded individuals and feel less alone. I spent my junior year studying abroad at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, went on the Mandel-Palagye Program for Middle East Peace, and took enough international relations courses that would eventually grant me an additional degree in political science. This past year, I decided to pursue a master's degree in conflict resolution and mediation at Tel Aviv University because I wanted to gain the skills necessary to make space for myself at the negotiation table, as well as learn how to expand opportunities for transformative peacebuilding.

**D**espite the difficulty I experienced during my initial transition back into the "real world" following the summer program, I have returned to Hands of Peace as the Chicago Site Director. Hands of Peace played a vital role in shaping my career trajectory to include not only a passion for environmental security, but also feminist foreign policy and how both concepts shape the peacebuilding sector. I look forward to helping Hands of Peace empower the next generation of changemakers to take risks and find agency within themselves to advocate for what they believe in. I also want to communicate to past alumni that it is okay to not be okay, and it is normal to feel lost after experiencing the most intense three weeks of your adolescence. I hope to be a resource for participants—past, present, and future—to create summer program workshops and Alumni Circle events that reflect their interests and desires to stay connected. As individuals, the pursuit of peace is overwhelming. As a community, peace is possible.

*Emily Kenward*