

I spent the first 18 years of my life in Glenview, Illinois. I knew its terrain like the back of my hand – which potholes to avoid, its finest picnic spots, and the best sledding hills. But after two years of Hands of Peace in 2018 and 2019, my hometown changed. Main streets were marked by my route to summer programming. My high school cafeteria became the dance floor where I celebrated the final night of Hands of Peace. When I ventured to downtown Chicago, memories of splashing under Millennium Park's fountains flooded my mind. Wherever I went, I saw Hands of Peace.

As a first-year participant, I was absorbed by our daily dialogue sessions. Our group struggled to connect; we lept from blank stares to anger. Finally, when the status quo could no longer stand, our facilitators introduced a storytelling activity. Each member of the circle – Palestinian, Israeli, and American – was invited to share a personal story that profoundly affected and shaped them. As we moved from person to person, barriers melted away, and we finished the day a tear-filled pile in the Glenview Community Church bathroom.

Little did I know how difficult it would be to walk away from Hands of Peace that first summer. These moments – particularly my friends' stories – weighed on me as I returned to school, halfway across the world from Hebron, Sderot, or Ramallah. The realities of life in Israel-Palestine materialized into injustices that I couldn't shake. And just as Glenview warped into a post-Hands of Peace town, I transformed into a post-Hands of Peace self.

I left Hands of Peace after my XL summer with overwhelming motivation. My two years in the program catalyzed a passion I now continue in college. I knew how storytelling changed me, and now I am committed to applying Hands of Peace beyond the confines of my two summers.

As a journalism student at American University in Washington, D.C., I prioritize the personal. Covering the coronavirus can look like data, statistics, or a spindling ball of science constantly in flux. Or, COVID-19 reporting can look like a college freshman's personal encounter with the pandemic, juggling health, virtual school, and unprecedented transition. Israel-Palestine hasn't left me in journalism either. I closely follow coverage of Israel-Palestine; I note its neglect to explain systemic violence and the diplomatic-wash over stories that demand human voices. I'm determined to rewrite a more truthful story. I've written about [Amnesty International's](#) report on Israeli 'apartheid' and the U.S.'s [commitment](#) to a two-state solution. In each piece and every interview, I try to make a conflict occurring thousands of miles away closer in impact.

Hands of Peace gave me the platform I needed to make a decision when I came to college. I saw no other option for myself but to channel the lessons of my two summers into anti-occupation work. I have been part of J Street U for the past three years at American University. J Street U, which promotes human rights, dignity, and self-determination for Palestinians and Israelis, has been the most rewarding part of my college experience. Here, I educate myself and others on the

occupation, from home demolitions in the occupied West Bank to the harmful impact of U.S. military aid in annexation. I advocate and speak with American policymakers, pushing them to sign letters against forced expulsions and settler violence. I also serve as our chapter co-chair and on the regional board, where I strategize with students on campuses throughout the area. Here, I apply the lessons Hands of Peace instilled in me: empathy, dialogue, and leadership.

I carry Hands of Peace as a toolbox everywhere I go. The program planted in me a remedy to issues I've encountered in journalism, activism, and elsewhere. As my two years in Hands of Peace showed me, there are always new lessons to learn. This is why I am incredibly excited to return this summer as a communications intern in Chicago. I look forward to continuing my journey in this role that fuses my passions for storytelling, digital media, and, well, Hands of Peace. Still, one universal lesson resonates with me after the program ends each year: the real solution to injustice is the people that leave Hands of Peace every summer. Each of us carries an unwavering piece of dialogue, conversation, or memory from our time. And if there's one lesson I know for certain, twenty incredible years of Hands of Peace makes the likelihood of change even higher.