Israeli kids’ drawings of peace come home after world tour

For 15 years, a New York art educator led Israeli children on a journey of imagining peace. The paintings now hang at Yemin Orde Youth Village near Haifa.

At the head of a conference room in Yemin Orde Youth Village, just south of Haifa, stands a woman with bright red hair and a booming Bronx accent. Her name is Maureen Kushner, and she is an art educator who has dedicated her life to teaching children how to channel their anger, frustration, hopes and dreams, into meaningful art projects.

The focus of her life’s work has been to encourage Israeli children of different backgrounds to interact and confront political and personal conflict — war and peace, and the accompanying emotional turmoil — through an artistic outlet, using cartooning, humor, modern word play, biblical inspiration and a lot of heart.

The pieces in the “Peace through Humor” exhibit range from cathartic representations of words, such as a painting of the word “noise” in Hebrew surrounded by depictions of the unpleasantries of daily life during the second intifada, to a hopeful “Peace Bus,” which shows a bus making its way through the Middle East to pick up passengers to bring them to Israel for a picnic. Others, like “I Lift Up My Eyes To the Mountain,” represents an Ethiopian immigrant girl’s family in their arduous journey to reach Jerusalem, which they dreamed would be a place of love and harmony.

Kushner offers the following explanation: “When you use humor, it allows you to take a step backwards, and see things through a differ-

Friends of Yemin Orde
4340 East-West Highway, Suite 202 • Bethesda, Maryland 20814 • 202-237-0286 • www.yeminorde.org

Next page, please
ent perspective. Different levels of humor such as satire, parody and farce are what get us through the tough moments in life. They are what allow us not to take ourselves so seriously.”

Two decades later, her students are still by her side. Sisters Michal and Miriam Luxemburg, whose paintings are featured in the exhibit, are artists in their adult lives. Michal builds ecological mud houses, and Miriam is an art educator for children at the Israel Museum. Another student, Tanyia Grade, is an art therapist. Needless to say, the humble art project of their youth had a lasting effect on them.

The youth village is the final resting spot of the traveling exhibition, previously shared in the Israeli Knesset as well as more than 170 cities worldwide over the years. At Yemin Orde, troubled youth of different backgrounds live and study, and learn how to live purposeful lives together as community leaders.

“In the Torah it says that the power of love and kindness is 500 times stronger than the power of hate. I have to believe that; I have no other choice,” Kushner says.

The exhibition will remain on these walls to inspire the students here each day as they pass by on their way to the living quarters in the village. It will serve as a daily reminder of the power of art and humor in a world that can too often seem like such a cruel and hateful place.