



Press Kit

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STORY SWAP INTERNATIONAL EXPANDS TO ISRAEL WITH FIRST MIDDLE EAST STORY EXCHANGE SEPTEMBER 19-23

THE ASPEN WRITERS' FOUNDATION AND GLOBAL NOMADS GROUP PARTNER TO BRING ARAB AND JEWISH YOUTH OF ISRAEL TOGETHER

(Northern Israel, September 6, 2011) — Arab and Jewish high school students of Israel — from two communities that are minutes apart but rarely interact — will come together for the first time this month to engage in Story Swap International (SSI), a groundbreaking program that employs the art of storytelling to build bridges of understanding. The collaborative project, founded by the Aspen Writers' Foundation (AWF) and expanded to an international level in partnership with Global Nomads Group (GNG), will take place September 19-23 in one of the most controversial regions of the globe. “Nowhere else does a program like Story Swap hold the potential, not to end the conflict, but rather to build a dynamic that might allow a resolution to survive,” said Mickey Bergman, SSI advisor and director of Middle East Programs at the Aspen Institute.

“Story Swap is powerful precisely because it harnesses storytelling — the most accessible and universal of all human activities — to open the doors of communication that might otherwise be closed,” said Lisa Consiglio, executive director of the AWF. “It works because when listening to stories, we suspend argument, engage our imagination, and, walking in the shoes of another, build compassion.”

The 24 participants of SSI's inaugural Middle East Swap, selected from a Jewish high school in Haifa and an Arab high school in Nazareth, will be paired together for a five-day creativity exchange that is part of a two-year storytelling initiative in the region by the AWF and GNG. Over the next couple of weeks, the students will begin preparing for individual exchanges with their partners by taking classes in storytelling, creative writing, active listening, and media skills (such as interactive videoconferencing and digital storytelling). The Swap week will culminate with face-to-face exchanges between partners on September 23 that will provide the groundwork for future community outreach, including digital storytelling presentations by students to their communities in November.

Story Swap is based on the simple premise that by knowing the story of another we are better able to understand each other.

“The program’s model taps into the creativity of youth and engages them not through the lens of their conflict, but rather through their storytelling and listening. The methodology allows participants to genuinely take in perspectives without the ‘threatening’ proposition of agreeing with one another,” said Bergman.

During the swaps, participants open their minds to difficulties, joys, hardships, and successes that are not their own. They share stories of family, landscape, and cultural and emotional differences (and, notably, similarities) that challenge their perceptions. They experience their shared humanity and, in doing so, create bridges of understanding. Past swaps have demonstrated that the transformative effect of the program lies in imagining the potential in their partner, which allows swappers to imagine the potential in themselves and, in turn, the world.

“When young people engage in dialogue through directly exchanging personal stories, we have seen it lead to greater empathy and mutual understanding, which is a building block towards positive, social change,” said Chris Plutte, Global Nomads Group’s executive director. “Youth leadership skills are also developed as a result of participating in SSI, where young people can act as positive role models for others in their local communities.”

The Middle East Swap has been in the works for several months, since the first international collaboration between the AWF and GNG that was held for student survivors of natural disasters in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and New Orleans, Louisiana, following the Haitian earthquake of 2010. This successful partnership, brokered by the Bezos Family Foundation (BFF) chronicled in the documentary “Story Swap,” forged a bond and a common mission between the literary arts organization and the educational NGO to take Story Swap to a global level. The two independent nonprofits share a humanistic approach and a belief in the power of stories. Together, they aim to break down isolation, increase interaction, encourage compassion, and raise awareness through storytelling.

Founded in 2007 by the AWF, Story Swap was first implemented between students from Basalt High School in Basalt, Colorado. Recognizing the wider application of this unique storytelling process, Story Swap was expanded to the community at large. By 2012, thanks to the Bezos Family Foundation, the Goldrich Family Foundation, and an anonymous donor, approximately 20 swaps will have taken place within neighborhoods, across economic divides, over state lines, and among countries.

More information is available from Natalie Lacy, Programs Manager of the Aspen Writers’ Foundation, at Natalie@aspenwriters.org and 970.925.3122, ext. 3#. Please visit www.aspenwriters.org to learn more about Story Swap.

The Aspen Writers' Foundation (AWF) was founded in Aspen in 1976 as a cutting edge poetry conference and literary magazine. Today the Aspen Writers' Foundation is one of the nation's leading literary centers and a stage for the world's most prominent authors, reaching over 1,150,000 literary enthusiasts globally. AWF programs employ literature as a tool for provoking thought, broadening perspectives, fostering connections, inspiring creativity, and giving voice. Since 2009, the AWF has partnered with the Aspen Institute, underscoring the highest humanistic ideals of Aspen founder Walter Paepcke: to better understand human challenges by cultivating one's inner life through the exchange of words, stories, and ideas.

The **Bezos Family Foundation** (BFF) is a private, independent foundation established by Jackie and Mike Bezos, who along with their children and spouses, serve as directors. BFF's vision is that all young people are prepared to achieve their full potential and make a meaningful contribution to society. The Bezos Family Foundation supports rigorous, inspired learning environments for young people, from birth through high school, to put their education into action. Through investments in research, public awareness and programs, the foundation works to elevate the field of education and improve life outcomes for all children.

Established in 1998, **Global Nomads Group** (GNG) is an international NGO that creates interactive programs for young people around the world. By exploring the similarities and differences that define who we are, GNG programs provide tangible opportunities to build bridges and foster meaningful dialogue through collaborative projects. In its 12-year history, GNG has conducted interactive videoconferencing programs in more than 50 countries on all seven continents, and reached more than one million young people.

The Aspen Institute mission is twofold: to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, and to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues. The Aspen Institute does this primarily in four ways: seminars, young-leader fellowships around the globe, policy programs, and public conferences and events. The Institute is based in Washington, DC; Aspen, Colorado; and on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore. It also has an international network of partners.

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