

Finding common ground Film brings Arab, local teens together



HERE: Lowell High School students (clockwise from left) Dennis Moy, Rene Pena-Govea, Hasan Tabeleh and Julia Rabinowich.



THERE: In Jordan, (clockwise from left) Nasma Barghouti, Fahed Zumout, Farah Abu Annab and Mohammad Al Humoud.

San Rafael firm produced documentary

By Carolyn R. Saraspi
IJ reporter

Teenager Rene Pena-Govea plays the accordion, speaks Spanish and studies American democracy at Lowell High School in San Francisco.

Halfway around the world, 16-year-old Farah Abu Annab plays guitar, splits her time living between her divorced parents' homes, and attends classes at the Arab National School in Amman, Jordan.

The girls, along with three schoolmates, meet via two-way digital satellite conferencing to discuss topics ranging from interracial dating to suicide bombers in a documentary designed to shed light on stereotypes of both American and Arab cultures.

"Face to Face: Young Arabs and Americans" is an original documentary from San Rafael-based cable television network WorldLink TV.

Producer/director Stephen Olsson of Sausalito developed the film after noticing misunderstandings Americans had of Arabs, especially

immediately after last year's terrorist attacks.

"The idea is based on television, as a medium, can be used in a lot of different ways," said Olsson, head of original programming for WorldLink.

"My interest, and WorldLink's mission, has always been to use television to promote understanding between people," he said. "The technology element allowed the face-to-face dialogue to take place."

The project cost approximately \$70,000 - roughly a third of the cost of a comparable public television film thanks to the technology, the doc-

umentary team's experience and international contacts, said Kim Spencer, executive producer and president of the network.

One of those contacts was producer Daoud Kuttab, who had developed an independent educational TV station in Ramallah, in the West Bank, with the help of Internews Network in Arcata, which Spencer co-founded 20 years ago. Kuttab headed production for the documentary in Amman.

Olsson filmed students in San Francisco for about three weeks in late April; he chose Lowell because, as an alumnus, he

thought he'd be able to minimize red tape. Olsson and one of his co-producers interviewed 30 students before narrowing participants down to Rene, Hassan Tabeileh, Julia Rabinowich, and Dennis Moy. Kuttab went through a similar process at the Arab National School.

At 6 a.m. May 12, the Lowell students gathered at WorldLink's San Francisco studio for the live conversation with their Arab counterparts. They met Farah, as well as Nasma Barghouti, Fahed Zumout, and Mohammad AI Humoud, through the television screen and talked for about three hours.

The discussion in the resulting 75-minute documentary is mostly in English with a few Arab words here and there.

"It's kind of jarring, the contrast between how little we know about them and how much they know about us," said 17-year-old Rene, who was 16 during filming.

Both sides break the ice by saying how "embarrassed" they feel. They then find common ground after the Jordanians say the movie "Spider-Man" is about to open in Amman.

But the conversation then veered into several sensitive subjects.

Moy, now a freshman at the University of California at Berkeley, recalled being asked, how his parents, who are Chinese, would react if he dated an African American.

"I said my parents wouldn't be too open, but that they would respect my decision," he said.

Tensions rose during a discussion on suicide bombers. Julia, who became visibly disturbed during the segment, appeared relieved after Farah said some Jordanians were boycotting American products to protest this country's involvement in the Middle East.

"That's a better way to do

it than a suicide bombing," Julia said.

"It was a little hard to listen (to)," she said in a debriefing session after the satellite link. "I can understand where they're coming from, but at the same time, it helped me see their point of view."

English subtitles translate the talk among the Jordanian students after the link. "I thought that everyone takes drugs in the U.S., but I found that my pre-conceptions were wrong," Farah said.

"They will pass on that we are not terrorists, and that we are good people, and that Arab culture is also civilized."

In addition to the dialogue, viewers get a glimpse of each teen's home and school life. Rene, for example, is shown singing and playing the accordion with her family, while Farah talks about her sister living in the U.S.

"It displaced a lot of stereotypes," Moy said. "I

hope it displaced some of theirs (of us) also."

Spencer said the documentary is the beginning of the network's programming aimed at teens. Production begins in January for a new "Chat the Planet" series linking Americans ranging in age from 15 to 21 to other young people around the globe.