

Building a bridge to understanding

Pen Pals for Peace connect local students to Catholic Palestinians

by KAREN A. EVANS

staff writer

CHARLOTTE -- Students at St. Matthew School in Charlotte are taking the first small steps toward building a bridge between the cultures of America and the Middle East.

The 114 fifth-graders will be connected with Catholic Palestinian children in Jerusalem and Bethlehem through "Pen Pals for Peace," a correspondence exchange program begun by Mel Lehman and Frank Lalley, two peace and social-justice advocates from New York City.

"The goal of the program is to get these dear children, as part of their Christian faith, to learn about another dear Christian child in another part of the world," said Lehman. "(Children in Israel) seem so foreign, but they're people just like us."

Lehman conducted a slide presentation Oct. 6 for the fifth graders, explaining what life is like for Catholics living in the war-torn Middle East. He also explained to the students how the pen pal program works.

Students participating in the program first will write a generic letter to a child living in Israel. Lehman will hand-deliver the letters to Catholic schools, and pen pals will be matched according to gender. After they are matched, the students will write to their pen pals several times a year.

The program is considered part of the classes' religious education, and through it they will learn about the history and culture of the Holy Land.

Only about 600,000 Christians live in Israel, a nation whose population is 6.7 million. Within the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem there are 77,000 Catholics and 166 Catholic schools. The patriarchate includes the Palestinian Territories, Israel, Jordan, Cyprus and southern Lebanon.

"The Christians over there feel forgotten," said Lehman. "They're grateful for these students, who want to get to know them."

Lehman and Lalley, who have been friends for many years, developed Pen Pals for Peace based on another project Lehman had created involving Iraqi children who were isolated due to United Nations-imposed economic sanctions.

Pen Pals for Peace was kicked off during Christmastime 2004 at four New York City Catholic schools.

In the Diocese of Charlotte, Pen Pals for Peace has received support from the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. The order is a philanthropic organization that works to promote and protect the Catholic faith in the Holy Land.

Alice Cella, regional representative of the order for the Diocese of Charlotte, initiated the process of beginning the project in the diocese and orchestrated the sponsorship of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

Msgr. John McSweeney, pastor of St. Matthew Church and a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, also assisted with the establishment of the Pen Pals for Peace program at the school.

Other support has come from Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic Near East Welfare Agency.

During his slide presentation to the St. Matthew students, Lehman explained that Christian children in Israel live in a war zone; communicating with American students encourages them by letting them know other people care about them.

"I'm excited (about Pen Pals for Peace), because I want to know about other people around the world," said student Marina Malak, whose parents are Egyptian. She was eager also to practice her Arabic.

Lehman explained that the children in the Holy Land speak and write both Arabic and English. An added bonus of the program is that they will be able to practice their English with American students.

"I'm going to ask them what it's like there, and tell them what it's like here," said student Sean Balburnie. Sean's mother, Jean Balburnie, is a Lady of the Holy Sepulchre and is helping to coordinate the Pen Pals for Peace program at St. Matthew School.

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WANT MORE INFO?

To bring Pen Pals for Peace to your school, contact Mel Lehman at (212) 865-6115 or e-mail ml9612921@aol.com; or Frank Lalley at (212) 663-2236 or e-mail dvallama@aol.com.