

# 'Taking a positive step toward a better society'

## K.C. native to share work of Israel's Peres Center for Peace while home for the holidays

By **Barbara Bayer**  
Editor

People make aliyah for a variety of reasons. When Lara Portnoy moved to the Jewish state in January 2013, it was very important to her to find a way to promote a better society there. For the past 10 months she has been doing just that, working in the External Relations and Development Department of the Peres Center for Peace. As we went to press this week, she was on her way to Kansas to spend some holiday time with her family and share a bit about the good works of the Peres Center. While she's visiting she will speak at Kehilath Israel Synagogue on Sept. 26 during Shabbat services to a group of students at the Accelerated Schools of Overland Park and to at least one other private interfaith gathering.

She went to graduate school and lived in Israel before she made aliyah, studying among other things politics and conflict in Israel.

"There is an obvious problem that can't be ignored, so it was really important for me that if I was to move to Israel and choose to be a part of this society, to do something that I felt helped the society overall," she said recently in a phone interview from her home in Tel Aviv.

The mission of the Peres Center is to promote lasting peace and advancement in the Middle East by fostering tolerance, economic and technological development, innovation, cooperation and well-being — all in the spirit of former Israeli President Shimon Peres' vision.

"We're nonprofit, nongovernmental and nonpolitical. We do not in any way, shape or form get involved in politics or take any stance. We are very much focused on the people-to-people grass roots approach — not legislation, not the political realm," Portnoy explained.

Peres founded the Center in 1996 after his term as acting prime minister following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

Portnoy explained that because Peres was still part of political life, "we did our work on our own but in his vision and he was always kept informed. After he finished his term as president last summer he returned to the Center as our honorary president."

In simple terms, Portnoy explained that the Center brings together thousands of Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs annually, face to face, to get to know one another through joint activities.

The Center brings people together in a variety of ways. Over the years it has facilitated life-saving medical treatment of over 11,000 Palestinian children and trained over 200 Palestinian doctors in Israeli hospitals during the last decade. It enhances cooperation across borders in the fields of business, agriculture and the environment. It also brings together thousands of youth every year through sports, new media and art.

"We work in a lot of different fields. Peace education tends to be the one that is most popular and advertised. It's bringing together young people from around 8 years old through university age through a range of programs including photography, soccer, new media, technology, leadership programs, and a wide range of cultural and physical activities for these young people to get to know one another," said Portnoy, the daughter of K.I. members Dr. Jay and Ellen Portnoy.

She emphasized that the Peres Center is not simply dialogue groups.

"It's never just sitting and talking. It's always bringing the groups together through a mutual interest to do that activity and for something tangible to be created out of it, whether it's a photography project or for our "Hangouts" program the group has to create some sort of product, whether it's a video or an activity day for kids in the community, it has to be some tangible thing they do together that's a product of their meeting."

The Peres Center doesn't do this work solely on its own. It has partners everywhere it plans programs.

"We are always working with partners, even in the West Bank. In Israel we always work with local partners — Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel. We see tons of interest. Many people from the West Bank, Arabs in Israel ... there is a lot of interest to meet one another. For sure there are extremists in every community who kind of spoil things



Lara Portnoy outside of the Peres Center for Peace in Tel Aviv, Israel.



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