

# Program brings Israeli students to Bethany

• By Steve Gust, For The Oklahoman

BETHANY — Imagine being 16 years old and never experiencing trick-or-treat, football or spicy hot Mexican food.

Nine exchange students from Israel sampled those adventures and more on a six-day stay in Oklahoma City. Stop No. 1 was at Bethany High School, one of their official hosts.

Noam Nizri, 16, from a Tel Aviv suburb, was making her first trip to Oklahoma. She couldn't wait for Friday night. It was to have been her first time to attend a football game. Bethany was scheduled to go across town to take on Mount St. Mary High School.

"I'm so excited, I'm so excited. I can't wait," she said.

Nizri and her delegation of young ambassadors come from a part of the world where the rocket's red glare is more than a song lyric. This summer, for seven weeks, hundreds of rockets and mortars were launched into Israel from nearby Gaza. Israel responded with air strikes of its own. It all ended, for now, with an August ceasefire.

"We have home shelters, and no teenager should have to experience that," Nizri said.

Gilli Reis Sacks, 16, of Tel Aviv, was a bit perplexed to hear Bethany students talk about the colleges they hope to attend.

"It's interesting to hear them talk about which school they want to go to while they're still in high school," she said.

That's because in Israel everybody faces mandatory military service after high school. For girls, it's a 30-month hitch. For boys, it's three years.

"So, most of us never even go to college until we're 21," Sacks said.

## **Cultural exchange**

The students and the teacher accompanying them, Ayelet Lifschitz, are part of the Oklahoma Israel Exchange, or OKIE, a nonprofit effort started in 1992 with support from Gov. David Walters. OKIE was founded to enhance cooperation between Israel and Oklahoma in commerce, agriculture, culture and education.

“Michael Barlow of OKIE asked me if I would do this, and I said of course,” Bethany Principal Don Wentroth said. He said he had hosted it in the past, and it proved to be a great experience for the visitors and Bethany students.

“You learn so much more about the people,” he said.

Despite threats of terrorism and what seem to be many on-again, off-again military conflicts, the students said Israel is a safe place.

“We have soldiers in the streets, and I’m not afraid to go out at all,” Nirzi said.

Itay Caspi, 16, agreed.

“I also feel safe,” he said. “I really would urge everyone to come to Israel. It’s a wonderful place with great beaches.”

### **Shared optimism**

The teen was also hopeful for the future.

“I think this generation will find a way to live in peace,” Caspi said. “It’s happened in Europe, and I think it can happen in the Mideast.”

The students said they know Arab teenagers and get along well with them.

Another stop awaiting the youths was the Oklahoma City Memorial.

“The bombing memorial is something we in Israel can relate to,” Sacks said.

Overall, they were impressed with the Oklahoma City area.

“There is so much space here,” Sacks said. “It’s very colorful also. Everyone seems happy. I want to learn more about the history of Oklahoma.”

A dance was scheduled during their stay.

“We’re looking forward to that,” Sacks said.

All agreed the teens share another common institution with their Oklahoma counterparts.

“Dating is probably the same there as it is here,” Nirzi said.