Young campers learn how to broker peace for social change

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There are bombings in Gaza and battles in Ukraine. But this week in Waterloo, local kids will learn to make peace.

Peace Camp started Monday at Conrad Grebel College at the University of Waterloo. It’s a week-long day camp for kids aged 11 to 14 — including some from Wellesley and Wilmot — to mix hands-on peacemaking with summer camp’s typical games, crafts and field trips.

The whole experience happens under the eye of Katie Gingerich, a Peace and Conflict Studies student from St Agatha. Gingerich is the camp’s co-ordinator this year.

This summer’s theme is “Epic Peace,” and the camp is a chance for kids who want to make a difference to get their hands dirty in peace issues, she said.

“This camp was formed as a way to both teach conflict resolution skills and talk about social justice,” Gingerich said, plus it builds bonds between the young campers.

“We are looking at different aesthetic attitudes that we hear sometimes, like ‘is peace really possible, what can I do, I’m just one person’ and give kids the attitudes and skills they need to go out and make a positive social change.”

Conrad Grebel has Mennonite roots, but the camp is non-religious and open to everyone. The camp attracts a multi-cultural group of kids, and Gingerich said she’s excited to see things get underway this week.

One day this week will be devoted to the environment, with campers learning to repurpose old materials by making musical instruments out of discarded items.

Another day, campers will meet a speaker from the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support, then learn how to write letters to politicians.

“Yet another day will look at conflict resolution and the campers will learn mediation techniques they can use at home or school.”

“We know that kids don’t always have a chance to voice their opinions, and we want to empower them,” Gingerich said.

“Every day the campers are walking away with a tangible skill, something they know they can do.”

But the heavier topics are mixed with sports and crafts. Fun is still paramount, Gingerich said.

“They’re not coming to university for a week, they’re coming to camp for a week,” she said.

Sometimes it’s hard to present a heavy topic, to make it age-appropriate or fun for the summer camp audience, she admitted: “At the same time, we don’t want to dumb it down. We want it to be real, we want it to be authentic.”

One of the campers this week is Kaitlyn Bilton, a Grade 8 student from Baden. This is her first time at Peace Camp, and she’s looking forward to learning leadership skills that she can apply back in her home school in Wilmot.

“It’s always been something I’ve wanted to learn about and be a part of,” Bilton said.

As a fourth-year student of Peace and Conflict herself, this camp was a new way for Gingerich to apply her academic studies.

“I think this is important for everybody, it’s not important just for kids,” added the St. Agatha resident. “I think everybody should have peace skills in their back pocket in some way, shape and form.

“For us to be able to do this, when they’re at such a pivotal age, I think is so important.”

Peace Camp runs from July 28 to Aug. 1.