

Queen promotes tolerance, acceptance at Los Angeles high school

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Her Majesty Queen Rania engages Taft High School students in a dialogue on Wednesday (Photo by Nasser Ayoub)

AMMAN (JT) - Her Majesty Queen Rania on Wednesday visited the William Howard Taft High School in Los Angeles to support its integration programmes and promote her message of tolerance and acceptance.

Five years ago, Taft High piloted an innovative and bold programme to eradicate prejudice and intolerance among its students. Since its inception, the Zerohour campaign has successfully fought to tackle those problems and promote multicultural inclusion.

Zerohour uses a three-pronged approach to deal with issues of intolerance: The SPIRIT class conducts anti-bias workshops and field trips to the Museum of Tolerance; the HEART programme employs conflict resolution skills; and the Peer Mediation programme trains students to mediate interpersonal conflicts between other students.

During the visit, the Queen engaged students in a dialogue where she encouraged them to continue broadening their horizons.

The students described the effects of intolerance and stereotypes.

“When people are so quick to judge me simply due to my race and ethnicity, I wish they could understand all of the hard times and hurt I have had to endure in my life,” said Rocky Shinya, an Asian American student, adding that a lot of assumptions are made because of his ethnicity.

“We truly believe in your message... Harmony amongst religious, ethnic and social groups is of the essence and must be in the forefront of all countries and leaders if our world is to prosper into the next generation,” he said to the Queen.

Standing side-by-side were “once rivals, now friends” Sergio Astorga and Abran Hernandez, copresidents of HEART, who personified the effects of acceptance.

Growing up in different communities divided by racial tension, “we grew to hate each other simply due to our area codes. We matured through the help of HEART to see how stupid and empty this hatred was,” Astorga said.

After hearing about the effects of the programme, the Queen engaged the students in a question and answer session where she described Jordan as having “an amalgam of backgrounds focused on one vision: A vision of tolerance, moderation, acceptance, and dialogue”.

Supporting the values proliferated by the Zerohour campaign, and lauding the school’s and students’ accomplishments in “calling time on intolerance”, the Queen said that suspicion and mistrust are the enemies of multiculturalism while respect and acceptance are the keys to integration.

Queen Rania, who has been focusing many of her programmes on the need to bridge the divide between East and West, stressed the importance of cross-cultural dialogue.

“Even though we have open communication channels, we know about each other less and that is something I always find baffling,” she said. “We have to make that extra effort to step out of our comfort zone, to challenge some of the assumptions we make... You’ll realise how much you can learn from people different from yourselves.”

Showing a keen sense of interest in Jordanian and Middle Eastern affairs, the students seemed eager to get the most out of a dialogue session, asking for advice on “mending hatred” and bringing together conflicting groups.

The Queen highlighted the impact of dialogue and promoted the need for a change of mindsets.

“I encourage you to challenge your own assumptions about my part of the world and learn about the real Middle East: Its people, its diversity, its history, its rich culture and tradition,” said Queen Rania, calling on the students to use online social utility networks to expand their knowledge of the Middle East.

“Next time you log onto MySpace or Facebook, take the time to learn something new about a person from the Middle East,” she told them.

Taft has come a long way in battling intolerance, but students still wanted some advice on how to break down lines of segregation.

One route to tackling that issue, according to Queen Rania, is to recognise that we have more in common than we have different, and to appreciate the beauty and wealth of diversity.

“To pull down these walls, or erase the lines of segregation, we must internalise and live these basic truths to start humanising ‘the other’,” she said.

The Zerohour campaign, now a pilot programme in some Los Angeles County schools, was designed by the LA County Commission on Human Rights to educate school administrators, teachers and students on how to achieve safe, culturally-appropriate learning environments.

When asked about her future projects, the Queen briefed the students on her commitment to education, talking about the school adoption programmes she worked on during Ramadan. Her Majesty also said it would be great to implement programmes like this one in Jordan.

Schools that demonstrate long-term commitment to developing human relations are eligible to become a part of the commission's countywide network of Zerohour Schools. The programme also includes the Hart, Gardena, Pomona and Artesia high schools.

To become a Zerohour School, one must pledge to implement a schoolwide commitment to peace and respect for all groups, develop human relations leadership among students, strengthen parent/guardian communication, education and involvement, provide opportunities for human relations teacher training, and support and implement Zerohour-approved curricula and human relations classes and programmes.

Taft High is a public school with a distinguished academic programme; over 80 per cent of graduates enrol in the University of California system. Taft has seen repeated success in the US Academic Decathlon, winning the nationals in 1989, 1994 and 2006. Taft has also won the Los Angeles Regional Competition every year since 1994, with the exception of 1999 and 2007.

Also, while in Los Angeles, Her Majesty joined journalist Arianna Huffington and several high-profile Hollywood leaders to discuss the divide between East and West.

"I have never seen such misunderstanding when it comes to both cultures," she said, as she urged the audience to foster greater understanding, tolerance, and acceptance between East and West.

The Foreign Policy Roundtable is a Rockefeller Brothers Fund-sponsored project, which fashions salons on global issues for leaders of the entertainment and media industries in Los Angeles. This is part of a broader effort by many in foreign affairs circles of the US to reach out to media and entertainment leaders about the importance of engagement in global affairs.

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