



International Women Stand Up to Intolerance

Lessons from Ukraine and Russia: A Network of Women Say “Not In Our Town”

Over 20 Not In Our Town action campaigns have emerged across the countries of the former Soviet Union. The ideas and model were introduced to local civic leaders by a group called Project Keshet.

Background

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, many thought it was also the end of institutionalized anti-Semitism and repression of the Jewish community. But today an estimated 1 to 2 million Jews in the region still face many difficulties, including the re-emergence of overt racism and the rise of hate groups. Project Keshet, an alliance of Jewish women in the U.S. and CIS (former Soviet Union), formed to support Judaism and address women’s issues in the region and has now built a vital network supporting civil society and promoting tolerance for everyone.

In 2007 Not In Our Town leaders were invited to Ukraine to introduce the Not In Our Town model to the women of Project Keshet. The leaders took the ideas back to their local communities and by 2011, there were Not In Our Town projects in 20 towns across the region. NIOT chapters can be found in Lviv, Ukraine; Lutsk, Ukraine; Zhytomyr, Ukraine; Cherkassy, Ukraine; and Kursk, Russia to name a few.

“The Not In Our Town model is a universal model, not an American model, and it can be used anywhere to fit the country’s construct,” said Project Keshet Executive Director Karyn Gershon.

While the focus is on tolerance and inclusion, Project Keshet also works to include lessons of self-empowerment and personal growth in its campaigns. Project Keshet’s Not In Our Town program includes leadership training, workshops, exhibitions, posters, educational programs and special creative events to educate the younger generations about tolerance.

The group hopes to continue to grow and expand Not In Our Town to many other cities and towns throughout the region. Noting a 2011 incident of anti-Semitic graffiti on a Jewish monument in the Ukrainian town of Nikolaev, Gershon said this model of teaching tolerance is needed more than ever.



“It’s impossible to repair the world with hatred.”

—Svetlana Yakimenko

Learning from doing

Lesson 1: Simferopol, Ukraine

Project Keshet launched its first Not in Our Town campaign in response to an increase in anti-Semitic and racist attacks in 2006. Then in 2008 an attempt was made to burn a mosque in Simferopol, Ukraine. The Muslim community had grown considerably in recent years and this led to increased xenophobia and increased nationalism. Project Keshet made the decision to unite with representatives of other nationalities and to protest against this hate-filled act by supporting the spiritual leadership of the Crimean Muslim community and speaking out against any incidents of xenophobia.



Campaign leader Alina Verhofskeya noted it was easy to bring this multi-cultural coalition together because of the established Not in Our Town campaigns already launched across the region. The Project Keshet women used their personal networks to help build relationships. “Project Keshet activists were collecting signatures in support of Muslim communities all over Ukraine,” said Verhofskeya. “Our campaign was presented at the meeting of the city human rights committee ... That campaign united not only representatives of different national communities, it managed to unite all Jewish organizations of the region who acted as one team.”

Then in 2011, when a synagogue in Simferopol was vandalized and plastered with anti-Semitic graffiti, the Jewish community received swift support from the allies they had built in the course of their campaign.

Lesson 2: Lessons from Cherkassy

The Not in Our Town group in Cherkassy, Russia launched a campaign to appeal across generations. In a citywide art project, children and women of all ages created pieces of art where they illustrated what tolerance meant to them. Their pieces were gathered together to make a Tolerance Scroll to display their anti-hate message.

<http://www.niot.org/blog/video-not-our-town-activities-cherkassy-ukraine-updated>

By including children in the project, the group hoped that this Not In Our Town action would begin to foster an attitude of tolerance towards all people from early childhood. One project leader noted that it was very important that this project involved different generations because they would get to know one another and this could lead to a more harmonious and peaceful society.

Lesson 3: Dialogue strengthens communities

Building tolerant relationships works to support a non-violent society of equal opportunities. A central tenet of Project Keshar is open and honest dialogue between multi-cultural coalitions. These coalitions come together to address issues that affect all community members, such as trafficking and domestic violence, financial and computer literacy, and women's health.

A real emphasis, which campaign leader Alina Verhofskeya credits with much of the campaign's success, is bringing in inter-faith leaders as stakeholders to the conversation. "Most conflicts in our history were based on religious background. Our spiritual leaders can ensure the peace, which tends to be a fragile concept. Currently, religious leaders are greatly respected in the society. And we offer them cooperation to address the existing social evils. By starting a dialogue we raise the issues like alcoholism, AIDS, drug-addiction, violence ... We are sure that it is possible to repair this world only with joint efforts," said Verhofskeya.

"One of the integral parts of our mission is to build a non-violent society of equal opportunities."

—Karyn Gershon

NIOT Project Keshar Stories:

<http://www.niot.org/blog/niot-model-spreads-ukraine-project-keshar>

<http://www.niot.org/blog/not-our-town-not-ukraine-not-our-world>

<http://www.niot.org/group/project-keshar>

<http://www.niot.org/hate-crime-response/roundtable-simferopol-tolerance-understanding-mutual-respect-mutual-enrichment>



To Watch the Project Keshar Films:

Project Keshar movie

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpCe-MhuNq0&lr=1>

Return to Yevpatoriya

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27kWjKKlm1g>

<http://www.niot.org/blog/video-not-our-town-activities-cherkassy-ukraine-updated>

For more information, visit Project Keshar's website:

<http://www.projectkeshar.org/>