

Jews, Arabs Unite In Peace Network

March 31, 1991|By Christi Parsons.

The two would not have even spoken to each other 15 years ago.

Shai Har-El was an officer in the Israeli Army, a veteran of two wars against Arab nations. Suheil Nammari, an Arab born in Jerusalem, embodied all that he opposed in the war-torn land both claimed as their own.

But when the two greeted one another in the suite of a Skokie office complex last week, they exchanged warm handshakes and blessings of peace. "This is my friend," Har-El said, one hand extended toward Nammari, then introduced himself to visitors at a discussion group of Jews and Arabs.

It was a small gathering, one that has begun over the last four months after work hours in Har-El's office. He motioned between himself and Nammari with his hand and declared, "We are good friends."

It is not a term that many Jews and Arabs, either in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world, use very often to describe their relationship. But in the Middle East Peace Network, the group that Har-El began, Jews and Arabs come together to make friendships they hope will one day spread.

Acknowledging the general distrust between the two groups on a global scale, Nammari, a Lansing engineer who joined the group early this year, said, "But when you get to meet somebody on a personal level . . . you see them as a human being. And all of a sudden there's not much of a difference between you and them."

One of the first Palestinian members of the group, Chicago writer Ali Baghdadi, said he expected Har-El to be a European immigrant Israeli, not the dark-skinned descendant of a Yemenite family that he met at his first meeting. Baghdadi found that he had more in common with Har-El than with some fellow Arabs. "I still say he is an Arab," said Baghdadi, who now comes to meetings regularly.

Perhaps if the two discussed current diplomatic stances on achieving peace in the Middle East or talked about Baghdadi's home in the disputed city of Jerusalem, the differences would be more sharply defined.

But meetings of the Network group begin with an outline of discussion ground rules, which forbid discussion of politics. Members of the group, such as Oak Brook environmental product consultant Jeannine Tannenbaum, are more likely to discuss their personal backgrounds than their political views.

"We want to establish this as a 'safe place,' where we can be human beings," Tannenbaum said. In a recent meeting, she told group members of childhood experiences that inevitably affect her behavior today.