

While climbing up a heap of rubble in order to be able to get through a crack in a wall on a blistering summer day, I wondered to myself, how on earth did I get here? I was in a neighborhood in East Jerusalem with my mother and sister struggling to get past a military checkpoint with two dozen other Palestinians. The only way to get passed this checkpoint was through a crack in a wall for select people—internationals and those with special permits. When we held up our American passports, the soldiers let us pass through. From the crack, I looked back over my shoulder and saw the pain on the faces of those who would not be able to cross that day. They would not be able to see their families or friends, get to school, or go to their jobs. As I put my American passport back in my pocket, I thought about the simple “privileges” that I have in my life that others do not.

Growing up in Oregon, I never had a reason to question what peace was. I took things like going to school, playing basketball with friends, or taking family trips for granted. I did not take the time to consider how people in many parts of the world struggle just to survive. In Ramallah, Palestine, where I spent a year in the seventh grade, some nights I stayed awake to the echoing sounds of gunfire in the distance, too close for comfort. On any given day walking to school, I might see military jeeps tearing through the town in order to arrest someone who would usually be detained indefinitely without trial. Around me were monstrous construction trucks and bulldozers building a giant wall around the Palestinian territories, enclosing the people in their towns and villages. Things like running water or electricity could not be counted on. It really hit me then: how could people live like this every day and think about having a future?

When I returned to the United States the following year, I was no longer the same person. I thought about what peace meant in everything that I did. I thought about it when I woke up in the morning and I knew that I had the opportunity to succeed in whatever I wanted to do without someone trying to hold me back. I thought about it when I was with my family at night in my house or with my friends playing in the streets—times when I felt safe and happy. I thought about it when I was trying to decide which university to attend knowing that no one would be preventing me from going to the

university of my choosing. Every human being deserves to feel free, safe, content, and to be able to have hope for the future regardless of who they are or where they come from. My experience in Palestine helped me to be thankful for what I have. There are too many people who do not have the opportunity to go to college, to be with their families or friends, or to go to work. Though I was one of the few people who were able to slip through the crack in the wall that summer day in Jerusalem, my hope is that I will be one of many who work to take down the walls that separate and divide us, so that all of us have a chance to live in peace.