

## **Imagine 2007 Azerbaijani-Armenian Retreat and Dialogue**

The main part of the program took place in Long Island, a small island off the coast of Maine. The outdoor adventure part of the program (the first two days) took place on a Cow Island, a nearby island and was led by Ripple Effect ([www.rippleeffect.net](http://www.rippleeffect.net)). 6 participants attended the program from Armenia and 6 from Azerbaijan (3 males and 3 females in each group). Most of the participants were graduate students on Edmund Muskie Fellowship. The participants were in the age range from 22 to 33 and had diverse professional backgrounds (among the participants were a journalist, a political scientist, a financial analyst, lawyers, historians and an engineer).

The participants came from various locations in their countries: some were from Baku and Yerevan, but also other areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan, including Nakhchivan. Two people were immediately affected by the war -- in Azerbaijani group there was an internally displaced person (IDP) from Aghdam and in the Armenian group, a refugee from Baku.

## **Methodology**

In order to ensure a balanced approach in the program, the facilitation team was composed of two 'insiders' (Armenian and Azerbaijani) and an 'outsider' (American) facilitators. In order to achieve maximum productivity in a short time the team of facilitators created a unique methodology that combines a number of conflict resolution theories. The program combined academic dialogue sessions with outdoor teambuilding exercising and joint living in a remote area. This methodology meant to provide the participants with an intense 24/7 experience where they would not only have discussions, trainings and outdoor teambuilding experience but also engage in everyday living activities such as cooking, housekeeping and unorganized leisure time.

The borders between the team building phase, the training phase and the analytical discussion phase were not strictly defined and went hand in hand, reinforcing and complementing one another. Team building continued throughout the workshop, while the participants had many structured and unstructured discussions that gradually led to the final effort to address the conflict itself even during the first few days.

It is also important to note that during the meal periods and during the breaks, but mostly in the evenings, the participants had ample time for informal interaction. They used it both to continue their conflict-related conversations, but also to get to know each other personally and to just have fun. Many evenings became memorable for 'mafia nights', a psychological game very popular in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and also for two birthday celebrations that involved dancing.

The program was a successful and positive step in the direction of creating a network of professionals and leaders across the conflict line who can potentially participate in the political and societal processes and contribute to a peaceful and lasting resolution. Twelve talented and successful individuals, some of them well established professionals in their fields, were able to overcome stereotypes, step away from their usual positions in the conflict and gain significant understanding of each other's needs and concerns. The dialogue session devoted to the follow up activities demonstrated that most participants had creative and specific thoughts about joint projects and were planning to advocate for more joint projects and to share their experience with their communities to contribute to growing network of people across the conflict lines.