Krista Thomason: My gosh, you were 22 when you sort of did the first trip and here you're leading as program leaders for ultimately, the college age students who are certainly if not your age, not that much further away from your age. Did you feel ready?

Sam Sussman: Yeah, the best part of Extend for me has always been the peer to peer relationship that I try to keep with participants because it's not really about my perspective or what I do or don't know about the conflict. Obviously, I have my own interests and I certainly have spent lots of time studying and learning about the region through my own lens. Once we're there it's not really, that's not why we're there. We're there to learn from people whose whole lives have been shaped by living in Israel or Palestine. For me, it was really just about cultivating a sense of openness in conversation. The two things that I felt were most useful for that, one was being the same age as participants and not presenting it as okay, here we know everything, here's what we want to show you. More, let's experience this together.

The second great advantage I had was the experience of Swarthmore honors seminars. We've always run Extend as a roving Swarthmore honors seminar. Here, let's get 10 to 12 people together, let's get as many different views as we can. It's not going to be reading 900 pages a week, or I don't know how many pages you assign in your seminar, I had some nutty professors. All with their love, but also nutty. You know, it's not going to be reading 900 pages but it is going to be listening to a range of views that are as complex and nuance as anything you'll come across in academic grad school seminar setup. To me, that's the real value of the program, it's that we don't enter with one particular agenda. It's about deepening your relationship to this region emotionally, intellectually, politically, and interpersonally. That means a learning experience.

Thomason: Tell me about somebody you met at Swarthmore, a fellow student who helped you realize something about yourself or who changed the way you looked at things and why.

Sussman: I'll pick someone who influenced me a lot that maybe doesn't know it.

Thomason: Okay.

Sussman: When I was in my first year at Swarthmore, so I was a junior, I was going on a birthright trip to Israel and I really wanted to travel in the West Bank afterwards. I had been to Israel before but never to the West Bank and I wanted to meet with Palestinians, particularly in civil society, people who were working on human rights issues. I had studied the conflict a lot but I hadn't had those conversations, I hadn't had a way of having them. I started asking around and there was a student who'd grown up in Ramallah who just as if it was nothing just said, "Oh yeah, my good friend's aunt works for a human rights NGO that deals with the way conflict affects women and children, she'd be happy to meet with you." It was such a small thing, but as I got to know her friend's aunt, whose now become a good friend of mine, I just came to appreciate more what this involved for that person.

Here's someone who'd grown up in Ramallah through the second [inaudible 00:19:00], who'd routinely seen foreign military troops storming through her city, who knew plenty of people who'd suffered horrific violence in this war. Here I am, this American-Jewish, poli-sci major with a keen interest in the conflict, but I'd never lived there. I mean, who am I to just kind of go, "Oh yeah, it'd be great to meet some Palestinian human rights workers." It would've been, now I think my interest intellectually, and personally, and politically was sincere but she had no reason to have faith in that. Right? Here I was going on a birthright trip, which from her perspective certainly, could've, and would've, and probably was troubling to think about. Right?

The concept is that I have a birthright to go back to a place that she needs a whole series of permits to get to going from the West Bank into Israel 67 borders. She just had every reason in the world to never follow up, she had every reason in the world to just go, "All right, all right, dude, have fun getting drunk in Tel Aviv." "Say hi to the sea for me." She had every reason to, but she didn't. Instead, she we went well out of her way to put me in touch with someone who is herself very busy, and had plenty of her demands of her time and that person spent the whole day educating me about her perspective on this conflict. There's just an enormity of goodwill and faith in other people in that act, and that's the sort of thing I mean when I said that Swarthmore taught me that community and kindness towards other people is much more important than what we consider intelligence.