

صوت الشباب

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The Voice of The Youth

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Helping Children With Autism: Al Bireh 30/30© Graduates Launch a New Project

Autism is brain development disorder that makes it difficult for those afflicted by it to relate emotionally to other people, often retards their language development, and so limits their ability to function socially. The condition is usually diagnosed at an early age, with telltale symptoms including asocial behavior, unusual speech patterns, and impeded sensory and motor functions.

Because autistic individuals sometimes also exhibit extraordinary mental skills, such as photographic memory or an ability to perform complex mathematical computations, as dramatized in the 1990's Hollywood film Rain Man, the condition is better-known than other, related behavioral illnesses, among them Asperger's Syndrome, which are collectively classified as Autism Spectrum Disorders.



Though often sensationalized, however, autism is not necessarily well-understood in Palestine as in many other countries, autistic people are often dismissed as dysfunctional cogs in the social machinery and sources of embarrassment to their peers and families. It is little known that although autism cannot be cured, treatment can often help those who suffer from it to cope with their impairment, and lead functional lives.

Earlier this summer, a group of volunteers at Ruwwad's Al-Bireh Youth Development Resources Center (YDRC) decided to do something to raise awareness about autism in their community. They

had just completed Ruwwad's (30/30) © Leadership Training Program, a month-long course which seeks to impart leadership and community organizing skills to promising activists enrolled in the organization's USAID supported National Youth Corps. At the end of their training, 30/30 participants are asked to design and implement their own community project. While in search of inspiration, the Al Bireh YDRC members learnt about a pioneering community center the Friends of Autistic Children Association (FACA), located in the nearby village of Ramallah (Surda).

According to its General Director, Buran Ar Rayyis, FACA is the first

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organization in Palestine devoted to helping autistic children. "The essence of what we do here is to foster discussion about this taboo, to shake people out of apathy, and to explain to as many people as possible what this condition means," she explains.

Ar Rayyis is motivated by her own experience. Her own son Abdullah was diagnosed with autism while very young; displaying all the typical symptoms, he had difficulty communicating, could not interact normally either with other children or his parents, and suffered from underdeveloped motor skills.

Ar Rayyis could not give up on her son, however, and with her support and coaching, Abdullah's learnt to function socially. Today, the thirteen-year old is a seventh-grade student and enjoys everything that school has to offer him; living proof of what can be achieved with the right kind of awareness, and a lot of determination.

Ar Rayyis tries to transmit what she has learnt through FACA's work. Engaging parents is very important, she emphasizes; according to her, everyone who participates in the association's activities has to work hard to spread the understanding that people with autism are in no way less significant and effective members of society, and that they have the potential to lead successful and fulfilled lives.

Seeking to capture that sentiment, the Al Bireh volunteers dubbed their

project "Ana Wa Enta," or "You and Me." "It is not just a catchy name; it conveys a deeper message," explains Mahmoud Alyan, one of the (30/30) © graduates, "it affirms the fact that as a person with autism, you are just as capable and important as I am."

Before designing the project, all volunteers attended informational sessions organized by FACA, says Mahmoud. Then they set out their objectives. One was to work closely with the families of autistic children; to offer moral support, but more to importantly educate parents about autism, and how they can play a constructive role in its treatment.

The young activists also thought that it would be important to help integrate into society people suffering from autism, by organizing activities that would allow them to work hand in hand with others. In the end the volunteers decided that they would clean and rehabilitate FACA's garden. All told, some seventy children with autism participated, along with over fifty Al Bireh YDRC volunteers.

Mayada A'llan 23 years old Psychology student at Birzeit University who volunteers at the Al Bireh center, says the initiative was meaningful in many ways: "It raised awareness about autism and other challenges confronting us," she explains, "and putting into a motion a project like this allows us to realize our dream of building a society in which young people can play a significant, positive role."

Like many seasoned community activists, Ar Rayyis knows that changing a society's outlook on any issue can be a slow process; that getting your voice heard takes more than shouting.

Mayada and the other volunteers understood this quickly enough, adopting as the symbol of "You and Me" a plant associated in Palestine with patience and steadfastness: the cactus. Since then, they have helped teach other, and their community, something even more important. Says Ar Rayyis: "We are setting an example of the things we can achieve if we work together and receive the right support."

A Chance to Be Heard: Youth Volunteers and Staff Meet USAID Advisor on Ramallah Visit

This past month, Ruwwad staff and volunteers had an opportunity to share their enthusiasm for youth development with a visiting representative from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). On June 21st, Dr. Clare Ignatowski, who is Senior Advisor to the Workforce Development and Youth department at USAID's Economic Growth and Trade Program (EGAT) paid a visit to Ruwwad's Ramallah headquarters, and afterwards sat down with a group of volunteers at the nearby Al Bireh Youth Development Resource Center (YDRC), one of three We Are Palestine centers which Ruwwad

operates in the West Bank with USAID's support.

First up for Dr. Ignatowski were meetings with some of the people who make things happen behind the scenes at Ruwwad, overseeing and coordinating the program's nation-wide youth work. Accompanied by a local USAID representative, Thomas Johnson, Director of USAID's West Bank and Gaza Education and Development Office, she was briefed at Ruwwad offices on a range of ongoing training and development activities, as well as new, up-and-coming initiatives. The discussions covered sub-grants administered by Ruwwad, the impending establishment of new media facilities in its youth centers, as well as recent rounds of (30/30) © youth leadership training. Meanwhile, Dr Ignatowski also had a first chance to meet a few of the



thousands of young Palestinians who are involved in the organization's work. A group of youth volunteers and recent graduates of Ruwwad (30/30) © youth leadership training programs were on location at the Ramallah headquarters. For these youngsters, some of whom had traveled from across the West Bank to be at the meeting, her visit proved a special opportunity to talk about their experiences with Ruwwad, and to showcase some of their achievements.

Among the most enthusiastic presenters were graduates of Ruwwad's (30/30) © Youth Leadership Training Program, a month-long course that helps activists enrolled in the organization's National Youth Corps (NYC) develop community leadership and team-work skills. Imparting hands-on experience with outreach, project planning and budgeting is an important part of the training, at the end of which participants are asked to think up and design their own community service project. Supported by Ruwwad, they then get a chance to realize these ideas. With the latest round of projects being readied for launch at the time of Dr. Ignatowski's visit, the pride and anticipation was palpable.

Ola Jabber, who graduated from the (30/30) © program last March, explained how she and other volunteers at the Al Bireh Youth Development Resource Center (YDRC) in the Ramallah and Al Bireh Governorate, had come up with the idea for "Alternative Career Guidance" a project to help young Palestinians find work that fits their background and education, a big challenge for young people in the West Bank and Gaza, which is suffering from a prolonged

economic depression. Jamal Badha, who volunteers at the Al Bireh YDRC on an initiative which he and other (30/30) © graduates from the center had conceived in order to help Palestinian children with autism.

Headlined "You and Me" it will focus on helping parents understand at an early stage how they can help their children, explained Jamal: "There will be seminars and pamphlets about this disorder, in order to raise awareness. We will then present gifts to children struggling with autism." A final touch of community work will round off the project, he concluded, bringing participants together to clean and rehabilitate the garden of Friends of Autistic Children Society in the village of Surdah, near Ramallah. As Dr. Ignatowski listened attentively, stopping to ask questions and offer encouragement, his enthusiasm shone through. "We will launch the initiative just a few days from now," he noted expectantly.

Other young participants joined with Ruwwad staff in talking to Dr. Ignatowski about some of the technology training programs that Ruwwad currently offers to its volunteers, including the Intel Learn Program, a computer skills course co-sponsored by US computer chip innovator Intel Corporation, as well as MYTecC, a regional early-learning initiative launched by networking giant Cisco Systems, which affords teenagers across the Mediterranean an in-depth immersion in IT and computer technology, while also preparing participants to engage more broadly

with a globalizing world.

To round off Dr. Ignatowski's visit to Ruwwad's headquarters, trainees at the project's National Media Center, a special facility which gives young people a chance to learn how to use state-of-the-art media technologies, screened two short documentary films which they had prepared during their training, one profiling participants in Ruwwad's (30/30) © training, the other covering an earlier visit this summer by students from American University in Washington D.C. who during their time in Ramallah joined other Ruwwad volunteers in helping out for a day at the local Abu Raya Rehabilitation Center.

The Al Bireh Youth Development Resources Center, which along with other We Are Palestine centers is soon to be equipped with its own Media Center, catering to local volunteers and graduates of a Media and Journalism Training course offered by Ruwwad, was the final stop on Dr. Ignatowski's tour. In this, more intimate setting, local activists took the opportunity to talk not only about their experiences with Ruwwad, but also their personal ambitions, and hopes for the future.

"It is a great chance for us to meet Mrs. Clare," said Tahani Abd Al Sammad, a recent Business Administration graduate from Birzeit University, who looks forward to continue working with the We Are Palestine network in the future, while also beginning her search for a job. "I so hope that this visit allowed us to show not only what we can achieve, as Palestinian youth, but also our need for more opportunities to attain our rights and

fulfill our ambitions," she concluded.

In offering final words of encouragement, Dr. Ignatowski made it clear that she had heard the message, loud and clear. "The significant role we play in supporting youth programs in different places of the world has concerned me and my colleagues for some time now at USAID" she affirmed before leaving. "After I have had the chance to meet the people that we target in this program, I have never felt more optimistic and assured about the vital role that we play in supporting their educational and professional capacities."

Everyone a Champion: Ruwwad Youth Tournament Ends on High Note

On July 10, more than five hundred young Palestinian athletes gathered in Bethlehem to meet, compete, and recognize each other's achievements. The finale of Sports Brings Us Together, a multi-event youth championship organized by members of Ruwwad's We Are Palestine network of community centers, concluded two-months of spirited competition among young men and women



drawn from 15 different youth clubs in the West Bank. Ranging in age between 14 and 30, they competed on the final day for first prizes in table tennis, five-on-five soccer, karate and chess. Yet as many later admitted, taking home a medal was not the main point of it all.

"I feel great, even if I didn't win," said Ashraf Joubran, a 23 year-old Media student at al Quds University, who hails from the village of Ithna, near Hebron and had come to compete in the men's table tennis finals. "It was enough to just be a part of this event, because I have learnt a lot, about the game, and what mistakes I should avoid next time, but most importantly because it was all in the best sportive spirit. And sports is such a good way to get young people together, make beautiful relationships, and help build community."

Sports Brings Us Together is the brainchild volunteers at the House of the Child Youth Development Resource Center (YDRC) in Hebron, one of four USAID-supported centers composing the We Are Palestine network. This April five of

them participated in Ruwwad's (30/30) © Youth Leadership Training program, a month-long course which teaches leadership and teamwork skills to promising activists enrolled in Ruwwad's National Youth Corps. Participants are given hands-on instruction in topics such as community outreach, project planning and budgeting, and are asked to put these skills to use before they graduate, by designing their own

volunteers wanted to bring together young, dynamic Palestinians who might otherwise have little chance to meet, explains Maysa'a. «The aim was to gather together guys and girls from We Are Palestine centers in the middle, southern and northern parts of West Bank, to promote interaction among them, encourage them in their role as community activists, and deepen their sense of citizenship, togetherness and



community initiative.

“The idea behind Sports Brings Us Together was that a lot of young people are really interested and involved in sports,” says Maysa'a Al-Sharif, a 22 years old English Literature major from Hebron and one of the bright sparks behind the project. “So we thought that a tournament like this would allow them to focus on something else but the difficulties and despair which many of them suffer from, whether it is because of the political situation or economic problems.”

Meanwhile, the volunteers also wanted to raise the profile of neglected and marginalized sports in Palestine, explains Maysa'a colleague Ahmed Aqel, a 23 years old student at Al Quds University. “Reading about sports in the news-papers we noticed that a number of sports like chess and table tennis are not really covered, although there are a lot of young talented people involved in them. So we wanted to showcase their talents through this initiative.”

Finally, the House of the Child

belonging, as young Palestinians.”

To add fillip to the final proceedings, which were attended by the Director of Bethlahem directorate of the Palestinian Ministry of Youth and Sports, as well as representatives from Ruwwad, the House of the Child YDRC, and the Al Bireh YDRC, local dance troupe Husan played music and performed traditional Palestinian Dabkeh for the benefit of the event participants, who frequently sang along and danced in step with the performers. A final awards ceremony concluded the day, crowning the victors in each event, but also recognizing every participant in the tournament with a special commemorative plaque. Speaking afterwards, freshly minted women's table tennis champion Safa'a Saleh captured the spirit of an event in which everyone was ultimately a winner. “In our daily lives we often talk about having a sporting spirit,” said the 24 years old Business Administration major from Hebron, “It means that even if we don't win, we retain that sense of what sport is about. So while I consider winning the first prize to be

a great achievement for myself, this competition as a whole is also a great achievements for all of us, as young people.”

A Day of Palestinian American Youth Exchange in Ramallah

Ramallah- A delegation of 15 American students from the American University in Washington D.C. visited the Ramallah and Al-Bireh governorate. The students are enrolled in Middle Eastern Studies, which focus on the Arab language, culture, literature and history, as well as the Peace and Conflict Program. This visit aims to provide an opportunity for exchange among the students from the U.S. and Palestine .

During their visit, the American student delegation met with a number of Palestinian youth leaders and volunteers from the Ehna Falasteen (We are Palestine) network and the National Youth Corp (NYC), other youth community activists, and the staff of EDC-Ruwwad Youth Empowerment Program who are responsible for implementing the (30/30) © youth leadership training.

The youth delegation and Ehna Falasteen volunteers visited Abu-Rayyah Rehabilitation Centre in Ramallah City where they volunteered for one day to clean the facilities, paint the walls and plant trees.

This activity aimed to encourage Palestinian youth to get involved in volunteer and humanitarian work in their community, as well as to instill the concept of community service and civic involvement as part of one's education. It also aimed to strengthen international youth interaction through the exchange of ideas and opinions, as well as to develop the Palestinian youth's capacities by benefiting from the experiences of others. Moreover, the visit enabled the American student delegation and the Palestinian volunteers to interact with people with special needs at the center.

The youth delegation and Palestinian volunteers met with Dr. Howard Sumka, Director of the USAID Mission in the West Bank and Gaza . Dr. Sumka said "this is an important visit because it promotes the integration of Palestinian and American youth, the exchange of ideas, experiences and opinions between them". He added, "the visit is also important in that it introduces American students to Palestinian youth, which promotes friendship, integration and interaction between the Palestinian and American people." Dr. Sumka noted that he was delighted to see youth volunteering at Abu Rayya Center

The delegation was invited to have a lunch at Al-Bireh YDRC with the Palestinian youth where they enjoyed a traditional Palestinian meal and learned about Palestinian



culture and traditions. There was an opportunity for the youth to interact and discuss with one another their ideas about youth, humanitarian and community issues. The delegation also learned about Palestinian identity, which will help them in their academic studies.

The visiting delegation expressed their delight at meeting Palestinian youth. Tracy Pierce, a visiting student, said "the visit will help us to understand and connect the Palestinian youth in a different light than what we see in the American media; the Palestinian youth are good friends who are full of hope." Her friend, Jennifer Anderson, was impressed by the volunteer

work at Abu Rayya Center . She noted "volunteer work is important because you help others and develop the community. It is great that we are working side by side with the Palestinian youth." The Palestinian youth felt that the visit was important because it shows the daily life of Palestinians. Shadi Abu Salman, who is a volunteer from Jericho , added that it demonstrates that the Palestinian people are interested in volunteering and serving their community. Azziza Saleh, another volunteer, noted that the visit will help her to communicate with American youth to learn about their culture, customs and traditions, and to teach them about Palestinian people's culture, hope and ambitions.

At the end of the day, the visiting delegation went to al Bireh Youth Resource and Development Center for a tour of Ramallah City . This visit reflects the goals of the Education Development Center's Ruwwad Youth Project for the empowerment of Palestinian youth that is funded by USAID and has established a network of youth Centers across all of the West Bank .



رواد في صور
Ruwwad In Pictures

