



# RUWWAD Report

Youth Volunteers for Community Assistance

Monthly News – February 2008

أخبار رواد

## Ruwwad Bethlehem Holiday Parades Kick Off New Year...With Smiles

What's better than seeing Santa Claus once at Christmas? Seeing him a hundred times! This was the verdict of 3,000 parade-watchers in the Bethlehem area, as row after row of "Junior Santas" wound their way through the streets of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, home to the fields where shepherds "watched their flocks by night". Led by over 100 Ruwwad Youth Corps leaders, the noisy, joyful processions were part of a week-long Ruwwad Holiday Festival that brought festive spirit to hard-hit Bethlehem, just in time for January's Orthodox Christmas.

To make the festival a success, RYC youth leaders teamed up with local partners like the Inad Theater, the Salesian Brotherhood, the Orthodox Scouts, and the Fathers and Grandfathers Movement. "Working with local Palestinian organizations is the cornerstone of our youth development approach," explained Ruwwad Chief-of-Party Hisham Jabi. And the partnership strategy clearly worked: "Thousands of children have now had some relief from the daily poverty and psychological trauma they suffer," explained Wa'ed Naseralla, a co-organizer from Ruwwad partner Inad Theater. "The idea came from our wish to make local children happy. Ruwwad's youth leaders really liked the idea, sponsored it, and helped us make it happen". He added: "By working together, we brought joy to our community."



"Young Santas" parade through the streets of Bethlehem during Ruwwad's holiday parades.

Community involvement was at the heart of the festival: Each neighborhood in Bethlehem put its own unique mark on the parades and holiday events. In Beit Jala, local Ruwwad youth distributed gifts and flowers to over a thousand children, and then staged a theater performance, under the banner of "A New Year, A New Generation". Undeterred by the winter rain, lively participants and performers filled the streets in front of the local theater, with brass-band versions of "Jingle Bells" drawing children and parents out of neighboring houses and into the open air.

In the nearby neighborhood of Beit Sahour, residents chose to call their part of the festival "Children of the Shepherds". There, more than 40 Ruwwad Youth leaders and local boy scouts led 1,200 children in a musical procession to the Shepherd's Field Church—before marching onward to meet their peers from Beit Jala.

Across the parade routes, and throughout Bethlehem, the reaction was unanimous: The festival was a massive success—mainly because it was organized entirely by youth, for youth. Bilal Mahboub, one of the young Ruwwad leaders behind the event, captured this consensus perfectly: "Nobody had seen a young Santa before, let alone hundreds of them. But this sent a clear message: Youth are the future. And we, as young people, know exactly how to bring back some happiness to children in our communities."

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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



## This Month In Brief

### Photo Exhibit Shows West Bank Through Eyes of Youth



A visiting student judges photos taken by young peers.

In North America, it's never been easier for young people to become photographers: Just pick up a camera-phone, point, and shoot. But in the West Bank, most young Palestinians have never taken a single photo, let alone owned a camera. In January, Ruwwad worked with the USAID West Bank/Gaza Mission and Palestinian firm Sky Media to change this reality—giving 30 marginalized youth a two-week photo training course, and the chance to show their work at a special exhibit in Ramallah.

Over the span of two weeks, youth from Hebron, Jenin, and the Nablus-area town of Beita learned how to use digital cameras and photo-editing software. Armed with these new skills, the young photographers proceeded to document daily life in their homes, gardens, at local markets and prominent cultural sites. The resulting images of the West Bank were poignant, professional, and often surprising—because they captured Palestinian life from a new perspective: that of youth. Twelve year old Iyad Mohammad Said, one of 150 school children to visit the exhibit, noticed this difference: “Usually we don’t see photos that show us aspects of young people’s lives, like music lessons or school friends. But this exhibit is so amazing, because you can tell that these scenes were all photographed ‘through the eyes of youth.’”

Said’s opinions were crucial—not just because he was a young visitor, but also because he and his classmates were serving as “Youth Judges” for the day: Each visiting student filled out a ballot, identifying their favorite photo and explaining why they chose it. The photo with the most votes would get a special mention in the national newspaper, and its photographer would take home a new digital camera as a prize.

But for most of the young photographers, the chance to show their work in public was reward enough. “Through the exhibit, hundreds of people were able to see the pictures I took in my village” said participant Kholoud Awaidah, from Beita. “This has given me new confidence in myself and my work. I’ve never traveled outside of my community before. But coming to Ramallah and displaying my pictures has changed my life, really and truly. Now I see that this could be a career path for me”.

The professional media photographers documenting the event were optimistic about the group’s prospects: “They are much more advanced than I was at their age,” noted the cameraman for the al-Arabiya international news network, the main alternative to al-Jazeera in the Arab World. “If they keep up their work, they’ll find lots of jobs open to them”. The next step? Taking the young talent global: Plans are now being made for follow-up exhibits across the region, and in the United States.

### Monthly Snapshot: February 08

- 1,300 young audience members see Ruwwad’s “Watan Theater” plays about key social issues
- More than 150 students visit Ruwwad’s Youth photo exhibit
- 60 Ruwwad youth leaders start clean-up and re-painting of 8 Nablus area schools
- 100 Gaza farmers take part in animal health workshops, learning about Bird Flu detection and prevention.

### Young Ruwwad Leaders Meet With US Non-Profit Visionaries

Building bridges between Palestinian youth and the US was the theme of a high-profile Ruwwad event in mid-January: In cooperation with the USAID West Bank/Gaza Mission, Ruwwad organized a roundtable discussion between Ruwwad Youth Corps leaders, partner NGOs, and visionary decision-makers in the US non-profit sector. Through frank dialogue with Jean Case of the Case Foundation and Walter Isaacson, president of the Aspen Institute and former CEO of CNN, youth had a rare chance to share their views with highly influential decision makers. “We as young Palestinians have the skills and abilities to make our society a better place,” explained Ruwwad youth leader Fakher Abu Mokhu, “but we need support and resources to make this happen”. Isaacson and Case, visiting Jerusalem to kick-start a new US-Palestinian Public-Private Partnership Program, were inspired by what they heard, and pledged to take the young leaders’ views seriously: “We’re here to listen to your needs,” Isaacson responded. “Tell us how we can help, and we’ll work to make it happen”.



## A Closer Look: The “Watan” Theater Project - Tackling Tough Social Issues On Stage

Every parent knows that it’s hard to have certain discussions with their children. Topics like bullying and peer pressure can make most tweens and teens squirm, and leave mothers and fathers fumbling for words. But in the Northern West Bank, Ruwwad Youth Leaders have found a creative solution to this problem: Throughout the month of February, they’re putting “taboo” topics like parent-child fights, gender equity, and basic conflict resolution on stage—in a ground-breaking theater project called “Watan”, or nation. The idea is simple: Get families across the country to start talking about social problems, by presenting the issues in a humorous, relaxed setting. And as the month of performances comes to a close, with over 20 shows reaching more than 3,000 spectators, it’s clear that “Watan” has become a success—not just as a vehicle for change, but as a unique example of youth-led theater.



Ruwwad actors paint faces before a “Watan” theater performance in Tulkarem.

“This project is the first of its kind in the North,” explains Yusuf al-Haj Qassem, one of the Ruwwad youth leaders in charge of the troupe. “We used to have some plays put on by groups from outside, like Jerusalem or Ramallah, but this is the first time that young people from the Tulkarem area have come together to stage an educational play for kids”.

Palestinian theater has a long and rich history, and is respected throughout the region as a platform for creating social change. But the industry has faced financial hardship from the beginning, meaning that educational productions—and plays by lesser-known ensembles—have been few and far between. As an unknown group with a focus on learning-through-acting, the Tulkarem youth had better odds of winning the lottery than getting local support for their work.

That’s where Ruwwad stepped in. “We knew we couldn’t fund the shows with our own money,” admits troupe member Ihab Kataneh. “We are a group of young students. But this is what makes Ruwwad so incredible: We approached them as a group with no reputation whatsoever. And yet we were very organized and we had a clear plan. When they agreed to fund our work, we were amazed. Here is a project that truly recognizes hard work, and makes an effort to help young people!”

With the Ruwwad grant, Kataneh and Qassem launched a theater training program for 18 area youth, led by well-known actress Moneera Zreiq. Nine of the youth were selected to take part in the final series of performances, delivered to audiences of 500 across the North. For this small corps of young actors, the experience was life-changing: “I had difficulty convincing my parents to let me be in a theater group with young men”, offers actress Farida al-Shin as an example. “But I didn’t give up; in the end they agreed, and I almost couldn’t believe it. And after I stood on stage for the first time, I realized that I wasn’t dreaming. Now I only hope that our troupe can stay alive beyond this round of shows. Acting has become my passion”.

Farida’s energy is infectious: At one Tulkarem performance, a crowd of girls rushed up to her after the show, thanking her for showing them that



Actors in traditional dress engage the audience.



young women can be actors too. Messan, age 8, wasn't afraid to address Farida directly: "Now that my sister and I have seen the play, I really want to play the role of *Dabdoub*, your character, and she wants to play the role of the bird in the forest. We never thought that girls could be on the stage".

Creating possibilities out of tough situations is a thread that runs throughout the "Watan" project: "We want to show children that young people can be important—whether you're a young woman or man," concludes Qassem. "And we also want to tell families that they *are* able to discuss sensitive topics at home, without being afraid." The play's scenes make this much clear: A bird in the forest talks about domestic violence with the creatures around her. At first, she's embarrassed to bring up the subject. But after being coaxed by her fellow animals, she begins to talk about problems she's encountered in her household. As the bird grows more confident, the children in the audience crane their necks in anticipation, hanging on her every word. When the curtain falls and the lights come up, the hall is abuzz with new conversations.

Kataneh admits that "one month of performances is just the tip of the iceberg; we really need more time to get these messages across to parents and children". But the impact has been far reaching, even within a short span of time: "My daughter came up to me and said 'Mom, we should talk about these things more often'," offered one mother, as she escorted her children homeward after the show. "This is a great sign, because normally she's so quiet. I think we're going to go home and have a nice long conversation about what we saw today".

### **RUWWAD Report**

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