

THE VOICE OF YOUTH

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Silent Hope: Empowering Palestinians with hearing disabilities

This August saw the launch of "Let's Give Them a Chance," a new community initiative run by Ruwwad youth volunteers



in the Qalqiliya area, which is using novel ways of tackling the complex, social and economic challenges confronting young people with hearing disabilities.

In Palestine as in many other countries, deaf teenagers often feel marginalized. Outside of their special school environment, many have trouble connecting with their peers. After finishing their studies they are also at a disadvantage when looking for jobs, with potential employers often being wary of hiring people they cannot readily communicate with. As a result, many suffer from low self-esteem, and are discouraged from seeking a way out of their isolation.

"Let's Give Them a Chance" aims to break this impasse. In its first phase, the seven-month project is offering sign-language instruction to relatives and friends of some 50 hearing-impaired participants in the Qalqiliya area, ranging in age between 12 and 20. The idea is that this will

help broaden and strengthen the participants' social support networks.

Critically, however, the project has also enrolled a number of local business owners, persuading them both to join in the sign-language instruction, and to take on the beneficiaries as work trainees. It is hoped that the hearing-disabled participants will thereby be able to develop their personal skills and talents, and begin to build careers in their chosen fields of interest.

The initiative is the brainchild of five young activists volunteering with Ruwwad's We Are Palestine youth centers, who earlier this year completed the

organization's 30/30 Leadership Training course. As a final assignment, they were asked to think up and design a public service project, and after some deliberation came up with the idea that would finally become "Let's Give Them a Chance"

"We saw two opportunities," explains 23 year old Rinad Abu Sirriyah. "There was a chance for us to prove ourselves, by contributing to the development of our community, but there was also an opportunity for people with hearing disabilities to address the daily needs, and to realize their ambitions in life."

During the 30/30 course, Rinad and her friends had received training in project design, planning and budgeting, and they put this to good use. She says that the first thing they did was to ask young, hearing-impaired people in their area what their needs were, and what wanted to do with their lives? The volunteers then began organizing in the community, inviting the participation of local business-owners.

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Program Contacts:

Media & Outreach Coordinator:

Ziad Nazzal

Phone: 022423541 Fax: 022423544

Email: znazzal@ruwwad.org



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Once the sign-language course is completed, the 50 target participants will be able to train for three-months as beauticians, hairstylists, or to work in embroidery, glass painting or computer maintenance. Ruwwad will pay their salaries during this initial trial period, after which time they will be able to decide with their employers if they will continue working on a permanent basis.

Rinad herself says that she is "very happy" with finally seeing the project realized. Wafa' Kmail, Ruwwad Coordinator in Jenin and Qalqilia governorates, agrees.



Special Abilities on Show in Nablus: Exhibition concludes arts and crafts training for Palestinians with disabilities

On the 16th of September, the Jabal An-Nar Youth Development Resource Center in Nablus welcomed journalists, representatives of local civil society organizations and members of the local Nablus community to attend a special showcase of arts and crafts. Of interest was a range of paintings, embroideries, sculptures and mosaics that spoke not only to the talent of the attending artists and craftspeople, but also of their ability to transcend disability.

The 3-day fair marked the culmination of Project Hope, a Jabal An Nar community service initiative which this spring gave 50 local men and women with physical disabilities the opportunity to participate in an extensive arts and handicrafts training program.

«The main goal was to help people with special needs integrate into society, by

It touches the needs of people with special needs, providing them with continuing services, and this is very important.»

Excitedly plucking words from the air with his hands, 17-year old Osama Qashoo'a, says that he is very happy with the program so far. "Every morning I feel very optimistic," he explains to Mustafa Nazzal, one of the volunteers responsible for the initiative. "I get to meet other young people of my age, and get to use computers, which are my biggest interest. I just hope that the program will continue for a long time, so that I can keep learning, and developing."

helping them be creative, and then demonstrating that creativity to their community; it is about using art to break down social barriers and misconceptions," explains regional Ruwwad coordinator Basem Bani Shamsa.

The project was launched by a group of Jabal An Nar volunteers who had in 2009 participated in Ruwwad's 30/30 youth leadership course. Drawing on planning and team-work skills acquired during the course, the students designed Initiative Hope as their final graduating assignment, and were with Ruwwad's support given the chance to implement their ideas over the course of summer.

The training covered skills ranging from free-hand drawing to metalwork, and



was overseen by artists drawn from the local community, assisted by Jabal An Nar volunteers.

The participants themselves displayed tremendous commitment over the course of the three-month program says Bani Shamsa. «They produced some fabulous work; many members of the audience were surprised by its quality," he noted during the exhibition.

Among those attending the event were representatives of organizations which had helped support Initiative Hope including the Sheikh Khalifa Center for the Rehabilitation of People with Special Needs, the General Union of Disabled People, The Palestinian Club for Injured People, and the Community Services Center at An-Najah University in Nablus.

Nidal Touqan, a 23 year old co-founder of Initiative Hope, felt that the three month training period had already gone a long ways towards breaking down social barriers and instilling new confidence among the participants. «Throughout this initiative there was a lot of closeness, and very beautiful interaction between the trainees and the coaches and volunteers, learning together, and realizing creative ideas.»

In addition to changing popular perceptions of people with disabilities, Initiative Hope also sought to empower its participants in more concrete ways. Like many of them, 23 year-old Moaweya Saeed Mana, who is wheelchair-bound, appreciated the practical value of the training. «The initiative helped us acquire a new skill," he noted, "which can be a source of income for all of us in the future. Sometimes, learning a trade is as valuable as studying at a university.»

Among all of the newly schooled artisans and artists who participated in the Jabal an Nar exhibition, their achievement was readily apparent. «All Palestinians can be creative," said Samer Al- Bashtawy, 25 years old and wheelchair-bound, proudly displaying a glass painting. "Like everyone else, people with special needs require only training and a bit of support to be able to express this creativity. Look at us: we created all of this.»

Spreading Light in Hard Times

Jabal An Nar volunteers organize children's activities during Eid

Young children are among those Palestinians most severely affected by the violence and economic hardship that has been wrought on the West Bank and Gaza since the outbreak of the second Intifada. According to various studies conducted over the past years, one in ten suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. With as many as half of all households living below the poverty line, most childhoods in Palestine are framed by deprivation and struggle. As a result, many young Palestinians find little pleasure even in those seasonal holidays which are considered to be times of happiness and celebration in other Arab and Muslim countries.



During the recent Eid al Fitr holiday, which marked the end of the holy month of Ramadan, volunteers at the Jabal An Nar center in Nablus decided to do something to brighten this bleak reality. "They wanted to do something special for the children during Eid Al Fitr," explained Rana Awade, Executive Manager at Jabal Al- Nar. «The goal was to provide some psychological relief for children who otherwise do not have any opportunity to celebrate Eid, and to allow them to express themselves.»

With the help of local groups in Nablus, such as the clown troupe Katakeet, volunteers at the center organized a two day fun-fair at the city's Danish Park. Launched on the second day of the holiday under the slogan of Let's Be Happy, Celebrate the Holiday, the event featured activities such as face-painting, theatre skits, puppetry performances and sing-alongs, and was attended by over two hundred children and their families. Having decorated the park with balloons and banners, Jabal An Nar volunteers also helped distribute toys and other gifts to the participants.

Among the happy recipients was 8 year-old Ismaeel Afoory. «This day was different from other days," he said, beaming and clutching a balloon in his hand. "It's a very beautiful day, there are many toys and songs, and the clowns made me laugh.» Mohammed Eshteway, a parent who had accompanied his family to the event, said his own children were overjoyed at being able to attend the fun-fair. "They really liked the clowns, and to sing along with the musicians and they loved having their faces painted," he said.

The Let's Be Happy initiative is only one of many programs that Jabal An Nar regularly organizes on behalf of local youth,

noted the center's Coordinator of Youth Activities and Programs, Taher Kusa. "We also organize many courses and activities which aim to both educate and entertain children and youth, and to assist in the general development of our community," he said. "These activities, sponsoring free programs for different groups in society, are some of the ways in which we seek to realize the goals and the vision of the center," added Jabal An Nar Board member Awny Al Dunbuk.

As the music finally came to a halt on the last day of Eid, children and parents alike waxed wistfully about their time at the fair. «I wish there will always be clowns to paint our faces with colors,» mused 5 year-old Manal Anabtawy before leaving. She was echoed, elsewhere by one Umm Qasem, who said that she wanted to thank the people who helped organize the festival, and encouraged them to continue their work. "I'm asking them to focus on such festivals, because it brings happiness to our children's faces, a happiness which they miss a lot.»

Coming Together During Ramadan We Are Palestine network organizes special cultural evenings during festive month

For Muslims in Palestine and across the Arab world, the month of Ramadan is traditionally a time that brings extended families together. During its first weeks, homes across the West Bank and Gaza fill with brothers, sisters, uncles and cousins, who with their spouses and children in tow convene at dusk to break fast together, talk, and while away the wee hours of the evening over coffee and seasonal holiday sweets. In large cities, cafes and restaurants often provide live musical entertainment for their patrons, invariably accompanied in recent years by late-evening screenings of the popular Syrian TV drama series Bab Al Hara.

In keeping with this seasonal spirit, Ruwwad's network of We Are Palestine centers this past Ramadan organized a series of cultural evenings during the last week of the month, with the aim of bringing together youth volunteers, program organizers and representatives of partnering civil society institutions from across the West Bank, who might otherwise not have the chance to meet on a regular basis.

Dubbed Ramadaniyat, the events were organized by volunteers at each of the main centers in Al Bireh, Nablus and Hebron and featured live music, theatrical performances and team quiz competitions, as well as the conferral of honorary awards on individuals and organizations who had made special contributions to the Ruwwad program over the past year.

In addition to hosting familiar faces from Ruwwad's three flagship centers, the Ramadaniyat brought together program volunteers, activists and representatives of affiliated clubs and NGOs who live in the West Bank's remaining governorates, with the Al Bireh Youth Development Resources Center welcoming guests from the Jericho and Jerusalem area, and the Dar At Tifl in Hebron playing host to visitors from Bethlehem. Many of the volunteers who participated

in the Ramadaniyat , helping to organize evening activities and joining in the cultural performances, relished their moment in the limelight. "It was an great opportunity to showcase the diversity of our talents," said Ehab Najm, a 24 year-old volunteer with the Al Bireh center, "but also it reflects on our commitment as young Palestinians to nurturing our cultural traditions, and furthering the unique atmosphere of this time of the year."

In helping sustain the spirit and energy that animates Ruwwad's work, and more closely tying together the We Are Palestine network, the Ramadaniyat also served a larger and more enduring purpose explains Ruwwad youth-development specialist Sana Abu Baker. "This initiative was an important part of our efforts to actively strengthen connections between the Ruwwad program and its volunteers," she explained. "These relations are the foundations for the work we do now and in the future to harness the ideas and creativity of young people, helping them to address their daily concerns and needs."

Star of the Month: Mustafa Al-Jowhary

Life has taught Mustafa Al Jowhary his share of lessons. Born blind, the 25 year-old volunteer at the Jabal An-Nar Youth Development Resource Center in Nablus has always had the odds stacked against him. Resourcefulness, perseverance, and a dogged belief in his own talent has allowed him to rise above his disability, but ask him what his secret is, and he will likely tell you only this: everyone needs to listen to their inner voice.

"My love of music began as a child, when I was eight years old," he says. "I remember that I sang a song during the wedding of one of my relatives, and as I did I heard people around me cheering and dancing. That was my first encouragement to pursue a life of music."

Mustafa, who was raised in Jenin, says that his family was always supportive of him.

"When I was young they encouraged me to develop my musical talent, and sent me to attend a music school for the blind in Bethlehem." At the school, he learnt how to read and write in Braille, but also something more important, he says: "I learnt that I had the will to achieve my ambitions."

After graduating, Mustafa was accepted to the Department of Music Department at An-Najah University in Nablus, as the only blind student in the Faculty of Fine Arts. He did not have an easy time, he recalls: "Taking regular university courses in Braille is very frustrating, and takes a lot

of additional effort. The course materials had to be re-written again for me, using a special machine."

While a number of his fellow classmates soon dropped out of the program, unable to cope with the rigors of musical studies, Mustafa not only persevered, but

excelled. In 2007 he graduated first in his class, and received numerous awards in recognition of his achievements.

Today Mustafa is an accomplished musician, most regularly performing with a Korg synthesizer keyboard. "I wanted to learn the Oud, because I always felt guided by its rhythm and movements," he says. "but professionally speaking I am better at the Korg, and at the end of the day, what I am concerned with is the music itself."

Mustafa says that he hopes one to day to play with famous artists from the rest of the Arab world. Yet regardless of how long it takes to get there, or how his life will change in the future, he knows that his vocation will continue to provide the guidance his eyes never could. "Music has given me a recipe for life, for how to realize my dreams," he concludes. "I want to keep following it for the rest of my life."



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