

DREAMS THAT BREAK DOWN WALLS: THE CHILDREN OF SHU'FAT

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Majd plans to be a pediatrician because so many of his young friends “don’t get the medical care they need.” Nur and Niveen want to be lawyers, so they can “help people who are unjustly put in jail” in order to “protect their rights.” Amir thinks about the day when, as an engineer, he can help to rebuild homes, schools, and other demolished buildings, or plan new construction in his neighborhood. Mahmoud wants to be “a world-famous football [soccer] player so I can bring pride to the Palestinian people.” Jamila intends to be a photojournalist so she can “tell the truth about Palestinians and Muslims” to Americans. Ayna, having seen NASA’s space explorations on television, dreams of one day being the first Palestinian woman astronaut. These are the dreams of just a few of the children, ages 10 through 14, who inhabit the Shu’fat Refugee Camp and with whom we worked during our time in Israel.

Brant and Spath worked in Shu’fat Refugee Camp community center with 11 children chosen by two of the community center’s directors, Inam and Sohaila, as best suited to understanding the purpose of the project. They also worked in conjunction with Reverend Julie Rowe, Assistant to Reverend Munib Younan, the Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land.

Brant and Spath brought thirty 35mm disposable cameras donated by the Defiance Meijer store to Shu’fat. The youth were instructed to take pictures of the people in their lives (including families, schoolmates, friends, and neighbors), the places they go (i.e., religious sites, areas of work and play, their homes, their neighborhoods (markets, school, the streets they walk), and their activities (such as how they play, work, worship, protest, or study). They asked the youth, through their pictures and in their conversations, to address the primary question of the project, “In words and photographs, what do you want Americans to know about you and your lives?”

At the beginning of the project, Spath and Brant accompanied the children as they walked around the camp in order to get a first-person view of what their daily lives were like. This initial time with the children gave the researchers an experiential understanding of the context of these children’s lives. After the initial “walk around,” the youth were instructed to use the entire roll



of film in documenting what was visually important to them. Upon return of the cameras, the film was developed and pictures returned to the youth. The pictures provided the catalyst for a series of rich and informative conversations. Spath and Brant recorded the conversations in order to capture the youths' views in their own words.

WHY THE SHU'FAT REFUGEE CAMP?

Shu'fat Camp is the only one of the 57 Palestinian refugee camps lying within the boundaries of the Jerusalem municipality. It relies heavily on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for social, educational, economic, and relief services. The Israeli municipality of Jerusalem is still demolishing homes and seizing lands adjacent to the camp as part of a government plan to extend its sovereignty and "matrix of control" over the entire area as an expanded Jewish Jerusalem.

The separation barrier that Israel is building snakes its way through the village and will likely be completed in the immediate future. It also cuts right through the grounds of one of the schools. The separation barrier cuts off Shu'fat from Jerusalem, as well as severing it from Israeli settlements. Finally, a temporary checkpoint (the plans are that it will become permanent within the year) has been established at the exit of the camp where Israeli military regularly subject camp residents to interrogations and delays. The checkpoint and the separation barrier create significant barriers to camp residents' access to education, healthcare services, family members, and employment. These

barriers also prohibit the natural growth of the village, and the physical, psychological, and social growth of the population.

The Shu'fat Refugee Camp was established in 1965 by the Jordanian government and United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) on about 50 acres of land belonging to Shu'fat village north of East Jerusalem. Most of the 500 original refugee families first lived in a neighborhood of the Muslim quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem where the Jordanian government had provided housing for them in 1948. Soon after the 1967 war, however, the Israeli authorities removed them for the second time to the Shu'fat Camp. It is the only refugee camp within the municipal borders of Jerusalem; consequently, many of the residents hold Jerusalem identity cards. The refugees in the camp pay taxes to the Jerusalem municipality, but, according to camp residents, the municipality increasingly refuses to guarantee necessary water, telephone service, and garbage collection. Educational, recreational, and health services are provided by UNRWA.

Today the camp houses about 2,050 families with a total number of almost 10,300 registered refugees, according to UNRWA. However, the estimated total population is closer to 28,000. This is due to the number of nonrefugees who have chosen to reside there because of its location within the Jerusalem municipality boundaries in spite of the poor living conditions. About 60% of the population is under 21 years of age. There are only three schools in the camp proper, although there are seven private schools close to the camp where the parents who are able send their children. There are two community centers, one that receives funding from the French Ministry of Culture and the other from the Italian Ministry of Culture, the latter is where the McMaster Project was undertaken.

A PICTURE IS WORTH . . .

The photojournalism project resulted in an art exhibit comprised of the photographs taken by the youth of Shu'fat Refugee Camp. Each child had a display board with a background that he or she painted. On each board were the child's pictures and a handwritten autobiography written both in Arabic and English. The autobiographies generally included the child's name, birthdate, place of birth, nationality, village of the family, gender, and a message to Americans.

Before the exhibit, each youth chose one picture to be enlarged. In front of a gathered audience, they were asked to publicly discuss why the picture was taken and what it meant. After the presentation, the children kept their display boards along with all of the pictures that they had taken as well as digital copies of their photographs.

REFLECTIONS

The photographic exhibit and public presentations were held at the local community center and featured Arab music and dancing. More than 100 community members attended on a hot June day. In their presentations to the audience, many youth expressed a deep appreciation for the opportunity to work with Americans to tell their stories. Family members extended invitations to the Defiance group to visit their homes and expressed how much their children enjoyed being involved with the project.

The importance of telling the stories of these children's lives and carrying their messages to a wider audience cannot be overstated. The problems the children and their families face were obvious. Trash grew in piles throughout the streets of the camp, with one large garbage dump immediately across the street from the community center. The stench was overwhelming as we entered the camp. Unemployment in the camp stands at 75%. The children spoke of no room for the camp to grow, no room to breathe, the houses right on top of each other "like a jail," "like a zoo," "no green, so we have to play on the streets." As we walked along the separation barrier toward one of the schools, we saw unhealthy sewage openly running between homes, an obvious cause of increases in various diseases. And near the checkpoint we were shown a popular gathering place for drug use--a kind of drug supermarket--which is a result of a growing problem among a young, frustrated population with lots of time on its hands. As one of the youth put it, "Because we live in a bad situation, it makes it very easy for people to take drugs to forget."

The children, however, showed great pride in themselves, their homes, that they were from Shu'fat Camp, great pride in being Palestinian. Some took pictures of the keys passed down from their great-grandparents of their houses in their home villages, some now destroyed. Their smiles were infectious as they took their pictures, as they painted pots, as they danced the *debkha*, the traditional Palestinian dance, and as they played their games. We asked them about their religion curriculum, about what they learned about other religions, especially Jews and Christians. Ayna reminded us that Islam honors all religions, that it respects freedom of religion, that, quoting the Qur'an, "there is no compulsion in religion." Suheila, their teacher, responded to our questions about the curriculum, stating that she teaches what Islam teaches--that Jews and Christians are People of the Book. She also affirmed that she teaches about the state of Israel and of Palestinians as well as Israelis, Jews, Christians, and Muslims living as good neighbors. Each one of the children spoke at one point or another during our time with them of having a choice, of making a choice, of channeling their energy not

to violence but for the good, for peace, for good “neighborly relations.” And there was great pride too in their Arab heritage and in their dream of a free and democratic Palestinian state.

However, they also expressed frustration and anger at what they considered to be their unjust treatment by the Israelis and, by proxy, Americans. The continuing demolition of homes, the building of the separation barrier cutting through the village and playgrounds, and the expansion of surrounding settlements all fuels this frustration. Yet they were able to distinguish between Jews and Christians, between governments--both Israeli and American--and their people. Responses from our group of youth indicated hope for the future tempered by a realistic assessment of the present. Niveen told us, “We hope this group will tell Americans our story, to use their power for peace.” Ali put it like this, “America is behind the problems in the Middle East; it is the most powerful country in the world because of its technology. America allows Israel to take our land. We want both America and Israel to use their power for good, because we know their people are good.” From Muhammad, “Governments do bad things sometimes but we know that the Israelis and Americans, like you here, can be very helpful.”

Perhaps Obeidah and Jamila summarized the group’s perspectives best. As Obeidah put it, “The most important thing is for us Palestinians to act in a good way; there are some who don’t, who use violence. We must act in a good way, though, so that people around the world, especially in America, will respect us. Because people think that we’re terrorists, we need to act very good so that people will know who we really are, so that they will know that our hearts are good.” And finally, Jamila said, “We do not resist the occupation because the people are Jewish or Christian; we want the land for all God’s people so that everyone can have their basic human rights. Jews and Christians and Muslims can live in peace with each other in this land as neighbors. We dream big dreams. All we want as Palestinian children is the freedom to follow our dreams.”