

A Report from Board Co-chair, Dr. Pauline Coffman:

My wonderful week with Seraj Palestine!

Taking on the responsibility of Co-Moderator with John Cassel has made me acutely aware of a need to see what we are doing, first hand. So I traveled to Ramallah, northeast of Jerusalem, and spent a week with Laurie and Estephan Salameh (and their three children) and experienced the special library activity for March - A Children's Festival!



Fida'a, our talented Seraj liaison to the libraries, and Laurie served as an excellent team to educate me on what we are accomplishing with this library project. Laurie & Fida'a are pictured in the Seraj Office located in Ramallah.

There are a number of reasons to hold a festival for children. First, it brings them to the library! We want children to grow up thinking of a library as a place to have fun, dream big, and enjoy books. It is simply a fact of life that the Occupation means there is not much fun in daily life.

Secondly, the festival activities are designed to spark imaginations and stimulate thought. The children, they told me, often do not have room in their villages to play outside.

The libraries are becoming community centers for children and their parents. Mothers often gather there during the day while the children are in school.

Because libraries are relatively new in these villages, the children are not accustomed to looking to books for fun or to broaden their worlds. We hope through the festivals that these practices will become common.

Marilynne Robinson is quoted in the New York Review of Books, saying: *"I talked once with a cab driver who had spent years in prison. He said he had no idea that the world was something he could be interested in. And then he read a book."*

Fida'a and the Volunteers

Fida'a is helped with ideas for these special events by our host of volunteers! As you may know, Seraj US provides modest tuition scholarships to a group of young college students each semester. They, in turn, volunteer at the library in their home village. These scholarship students have become an enthusiastic band of folks that now numbers about 50!

Estephan, Laurie and Fida'a bring them together every few months to meet and celebrate their work. One has been hired by the Aida Refugee Camp Library to serve as librarian!

One day, I sat outside a classroom building at Bir Zeit University (just north of Ramalleh) where Laurie had an appointment. As I waited, I watched students moving from one building to another. To my delight, two of them—both volunteers with Seraj-- recognized me, and came over to introduce themselves and welcome me to the campus. They are clearly proud of their connections to Seraj Palestine and of the work they are doing. Here are some of them:



Fida'a is an artist. As a story-teller, she markets her talent to various groups in the West Bank and in some neighboring countries. She knows the artist community well and invited one to accompany us on each visit. These artists are paid a small fee to participate with Seraj. By doing so, we support the local artists community and give children a chance to see young people who look and talk like them engaged in creative pursuits!

Our project now has eight libraries, and I was able to visit six of them on this one week visit. We began in **Burham and Jibya**, a small village near Ramalleh.

Here, our artist used a book of shadows to spark children's imagination, and then encouraged them to try out making shadows in front of a simple sheet of paper with a light situated to produce a show image. Every eye was on the paper!



At **Al Mizra'a Al Sharqiyyeh**, a young violinist from the Al-Kamanjaddi Conservatory demonstrated the violin and taught the children a song. (If you have the book, *Children of Stone: The Power of Music in a Hard Land*, by Sandy Tolan, her picture is on the cover.)



The Conservatory was founded by Ramzi Hussein Aburedwan who has performed with Daniel Barenboim of the West-East Divan Orchestra, recently featured in the CBS show, "Sixty Minutes."

As the violinist demonstrated the violin, I wondered how many might decide to take lessons and learn to do what she was doing.

I learned that our library in Al Mizra became the catalyst for the community to raise money and build a larger three-story building for youth activities. The Library is now in this building, on the first floor—a large brightly furnished room.



While we were there, several boys appeared in their white Karate uniforms. They were in the building for a class on another floor and stopped to see what all the activity was about!

The Al Mizra library was initially funded by a large gift from Board member Colleen Jersild in memory of her father, Clyde M. Campbell.



The Al Mizra folks have created a community center that buzzes with activity!

At **Deir Amar**, Ameer (a guitarist, from the Edward Said Conservatory) talked with each child and, after the child named a few things they like to do, made up a song which he sang to that child, accompanying himself on the guitar.

There must have been sixty children crammed into the library, each waiting a turn.



After some time, the volunteers ushered half the group outside for some physical activity, which the others enjoyed Ameer's music and creativity.



Such rich chords came from Ameer's guitar! He is also part of a group that recorded a popular song that is currently on the radio in Palestine!

When we arrived at the **Jiftlek** Library in the Jordan Valley (just north of Jericho), I couldn't find it! It is our only library in Area C (where Israel is fully in charge). Any improvements or new construction require a permit (which are rarely given out). Unauthorized improvements are demolished.

This opening in the wall is the entrance.



I soon learned that the charm of the library was to be found inside a nondescript low structure.



This library is partially funded by gifts honoring our first Seraj US President, Jim Wall! There is a sign outside the building noting that gift.

There, about 30 children had just finished making bracelets and were ready for a break.

Rashid (a leader in the Jordan Valley Solidarity Group) led them outside to an area of lush green grasses (it IS the Jordan Valley, after all). He gave each child a book and they settled down to read.



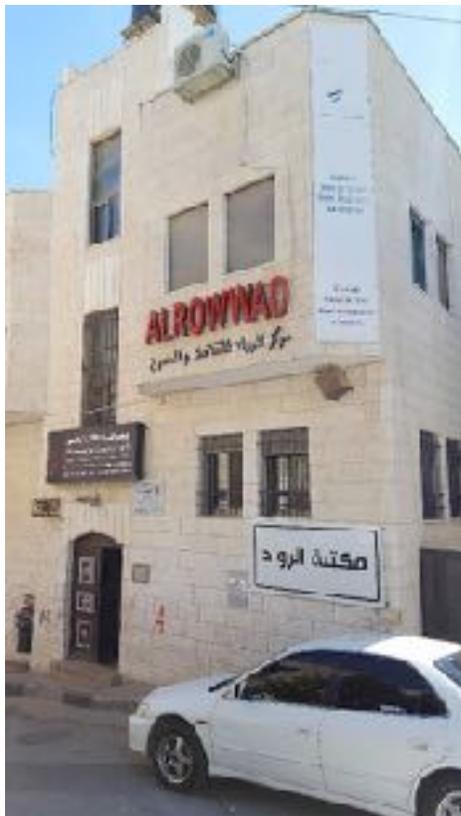
One little girl wanted to be by herself—in the lush tall green grass!



This is my favorite picture.



Then they trooped back inside where Alaa, our artist for the day, and Fida'a led them in a drawing project, asking them to express their dreams. The morning ended in a boisterous caterpillar train, led by Zainab, of the Women's Cooperative.



We visited the **Aida Refugee Camp** in Bethlehem on the final day of my visit. Our library is housed in the Al-Rowad Theater and Cultural Center.

I learned that the camp has about 6,000 people from 41 villages, and 4,000 of them are under the age of 18. 70% are unemployed.

The camp is crowded. It experiences tear gas weekly, and the library becomes a refuge. Everyone crowds inside and the windows and doors are shut tightly.

There, our artist - a young ballet dancer, led the children in movement.



Fida'a enlivens the group!

In the afternoon, we drove to **Taybeh**, and met in space provided by the Taybeh Women's Cooperative. It is located in the Old City on a side hill with a view of the Dead Sea (in the distance).



In Taybeh, we visited the ruins of St George church, originally built by Constantine in the 4th century. Taybeh was once called Ephraim, where Jesus spent time with his disciples after he raised Lazarus back to life (John 11:54). Taybeh was inhabited by Canaanites as far back as 2500 BC. Now it's a village of all Christians.



There's also a brewery there.

And a Seraj library....

The group started small...but kept growing, until we had about 30 children in the room! With adult watching around the edges, it was packed.



If you wanted to ponder something, you had only to look up! The volunteers had decorated the room.

This is the library funded primarily by a gift from St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Evanston.

A bonus on the trip was a chance to meet **Elisabeth Trost** (Libby to close friends)! She is finishing up a tour as a teacher of English in a school in Nablus, and will join the Seraj US Board upon her return this summer. Welcome, Libby!



Laurie, Estephan, and I enjoyed a tour of the old city of Nablus on Saturday, arranged by Libby.



Some of the radishes are the size of apples! And the Knaffeh! Knaffeh is a delicious treat of goat cheese atop a base of shortbread-like crust, topped with a caramelly syrup. Nablus Knaffeh is known to be the best in all of Palestine! Yum. (The line was long...)



We did not visit the **Jifna Library** nor the **Kufor Ni'meh Library**. Both are in transition, looking at different, more accessible space, with the support of the local villages.

Seraj Palestine is thriving, and Laurie and Fida'a plot and scheme ways to enrich the lives of children who are hungry for encouragement to grow and thrive.

We thrive, in spite of signs like this one...every time you cross from Area A



to B or to C, another sign like this reminds you of how TERRIFYING Palestinians can be! I have to say, *I didn't see a single Palestinian terrorist*...and I hope one day our Israeli friends can realize that. (A is under Palestinian security control, B is shared by Israeli and Palestinian security, and C is solely patrolled by Israeli troops.)

We, Seraj US and Seraj Palestine, are doing a good thing, my friends.
Thank you for making it all possible.

It was a privilege to be here. Thank you, Seraj Palestine, for your
hospitality! Especially, thank you to my hosts, the Salameh family!



Pauline Coffman, Co-Moderator of the Seraj Library Project

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