

Dr. Estephan Salameh, Seraj Library Project Co-founder

Addresses the 2018 Benefit
October 14 at Chateau Ritz

Good evening,

Thank you Yazan for being with us tonight and for your inspiring words.

It is really good to be here, thank you for having me tonight...

I am honored to stand before you today carrying with me the hopes and dreams of our growing Seraj community in Palestine. I also bring with me special greetings from our wonderful and dedicated board in Palestine and from my wife Laurie, a native of the Chicago suburbs, the co-founder and the director of the Seraj Libraries in Palestine, who couldn't be here this year but hopes to be with you next year. I say this every year and I mean it every time I say it. But I really mean it this time! Believe me, she is a lot more interesting than I am. Something to look forward to next year.

I am thankful for the opportunity tonight to share stories with you from our meaningful work this past year and our exciting plans for the future.

When we speak about Seraj and the work we do, I so often remember Margaret Mead, the American Cultural Anthropologist, who once said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has"

Twelve years ago, a small group of individuals who believed in the idea of Seraj, came together and later on donated around \$11,000 to start our first library in the village of Jifna. We used every penny at that time to get the first library started but it wasn't enough. Today, that handful of individuals has multiplied to over 900 regular friends and supporters. Tonight, you are true representatives of this wonderful and generous group of supporters, not only to the Seraj Library Project but to peace and Justice in Israel and Palestine.

Let me tell you what we were able to achieve together over the past 12 years. Here are some quick numbers for you:

- 10 libraries will be established by year end
- 54 scholarships awarded in total
- 92 activities implemented by us last year
- 256 activities implemented by our partners last year
- Over 37,000 books purchased since the beginning but will add at least another 6000 by the end of this year.
- 60,000 people directly or indirectly benefitting from our libraries

This year, particularly, we really hit our stride in our work in Palestine. Our volunteers are learning and engaging at a deeper level. Our expertise in designing simple but meaningful programs has grown, the number of students on our scholarship program has increased and our reach has greatly expanded.

What has grown from our small dream of opening one modest library in the village of Jifna is remarkable. And the more we do, the broader our reach and the more lives touched by Seraj we realize there is even more work to do.

Your support this past year was unprecedented. It has grown 15 times since 2008. From \$11,000 to \$153,000. CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL OF US AND A BIG THANK YOU TO ALL OF YOU AND THOSE WHO GENEROUSLY AND REGULARLY DONATE TO SERAJ BUT COULDN'T MAKE IT TONIGHT.

For the first time it has allowed us to open two libraries in one year. Our dream is to give each community in Palestine, small or large, the opportunity to enjoy and use the space of a public library as a place where change can take place. This is our modest way to transform our community and the world and we are honored to share this beautiful journey with you.

Every year, at this benefit, we try to introduce a new idea or an exciting project to take on with, you, our partners. In the past, we announced the creation of a new library somewhere in Palestine and we continue to do that every year, The BJ Wagner fellowship program was announced 3 years ago and it continues strongly, new partnerships or cultural activities or a maintenance fund were launched to sustain the libraries...

This year I am pleased to introduce on behalf of our Seraj communities here and in Palestine our biggest and most exciting initiative so far, the first Palestine National Storytelling Center. Let me tell you more about it and hopefully encourage you to be part of it.

I would like to start with this quote by *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, award winning Nigerian author*

“Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

We live in a world where stories matter. This is especially true in a place like the Middle East where every word and even every stone or brick has a compelling story and long history. So often those stories struggle to be heard.

In places where conflict persists, stories are buried and forgotten. As a result, people lose touch with their humanity allowing injustice to prevail.

Palestine is a classic example of this. But it doesn't have to continue. Seraj Library Project has a moral responsibility to reconstruct those stories from under the ashes. Not to negate any other people but to bring people together and replace injustice with justice and peace for all.

Since the inception of Seraj, we have focused on traditional community libraries. This time we are evolving to a national library that preserves the oral history of Palestinian communities. Our next library will be a storytelling center that gives people the opportunity to tell, write and record their stories. Seraj will store them in one place

and make them available to all. These stories will not only be archived on the shelf. They will be interactive. Seraj will train people on how to collect stories and use them as a basis for plays, music, art, writing and traditional storytelling.

This is an exciting project that we will take on for years to come. We count on your support to make it happen.

But why are books, libraries, reading and storytelling so important and why Seraj is focusing on something that some people consider arcane in the age of technology and smart machines?

Here is what you heard Laurie speak about in the video we just watched. We held a workshop for university students a few weeks ago and she spoke about the importance of reading and storytelling.

“When we remember and discover old stories from our villages and communities and with every old tale we tell, we make it harder for our culture to be stolen, distorted or forgotten. A famous American writer, Ray Bradbury, said “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture. You just have to get people to stop reading.” In order to save our culture and identity from being erased, we need to keep telling stories and keep reading. Stories are how we pass along identity from generation to generation. We can’t let this culture be erased slowly, it’s our duty to inspire members of our community to tell these stories and to keep reading. And we can’t inspire people if we don’t do it ourselves!

There are many beautiful books by Palestinian authors. Reading is not something we do in school and then never again. And reading isn’t scrolling through Facebook!” Laurie said to this group of students, I quote, “I read at least one book a week. Sometimes fiction, sometimes biographies, history or poetry. We should each challenge ourselves to read a book this semester that is not for a university class. What interests you? A book has the power to change your life. Even here in Palestine, living under occupation. Your mind is not occupied. You can set it free through reading.

Frederick Douglas (a former slave in America) said: I quote: “Once you read you will be forever free”

At the end of the day, Seraj is such a simple idea and for 12 years now, we continue to be a relatively small organization, doing activities that have proven to produce tremendous impact. The libraries we establish with your support are not cemeteries of books, they have become centers of change providing the right environment for children, youth and young adults, particularly women and girls to become drivers of change in their own communities.

Because we stay committed to the communities in which we open our libraries, we can build programs and activities that meet the differing and specific needs of each community, allowing them opportunities to transform themselves as individuals and as a whole. Our favorite inspirational story comes from our library in the village of Al-Mizra Al-Sharqiyyeh, generously supported by Colleen Jersild in the name of her father, Clyde M. Campbell. When we opened that library in 2011, it was in the basement of the modest village council building. The whole community supported the

youth club in their efforts to make the library active. They held reading competitions, movie night, arts and crafts days, storytelling hour... all kinds of wonderful library activities during the day. In the evening the various groups in the village met to discuss how to improve their village. They used the physical space of the library to turn their dreams into plans, and they used the activities of the library to demonstrate to other supporters how involved they are in the improvement of their community. As a result, they were able to find support from donors abroad to develop a four story community center, with an adjacent soccer field! The building now houses a gym, a karate club, dance school... and on the first floor, as the literal and figurative foundation: our library. Hundreds of people turn up to library events in this village because they experienced first-hand how a library, along with volunteerism, have the power to transform a community.

Our scholarship program is allowing young people the chance to continue their education. For the first time we are supporting a college student who volunteers with us at our Ramallah office.

We first met Mohammad at the Layali Ramadaniye event in 2017 when he turned up asking if he could volunteer with us. He had heard about us from a friend and was interested to spend time volunteering with our programs. He later came to our office to make a donation of some of his personal books. He attends our meetings and workshops always providing a helping hand, whether by carrying heavy sound equipment, providing translation or making phone calls to our volunteers. He arrives early and is the last one to leave. Mohammad is a sophomore at Birzeit University studying law and volunteers at our office in Ramallah. Mohammad speaks four languages: Arabic, English, German and now Japanese. He earned a full scholarship to a German University to study International Humanitarian Law. Unfortunately, Mohammad's mother has a West Bank ID and his father has a Jerusalem ID. Because of the Occupation restrictions, this left Mohammad without an ID himself. He is stateless. He is stateless on papers but Palestinian by birth and in his heart. As a result, he cannot travel. In fact, he can barely leave Ramallah because he is not permitted to cross checkpoints. His only outlet to the rest of the world is through books, reading and the Internet.

As you may have seen in your program, we asked him to briefly introduce himself. He wrote:

“My name is Mohamed Saleem. I am a stateless Palestinian living in Ramallah. The difference of documents each of my parents holds made me without any ID myself. I study law in Birzeit University. I read mostly novels; my favorite writer is Fyodor Dostoevsky. In May I bought his complete works, maybe I buy books more than I read but I like to read as much as I can. For the future I hope to be free and happy and nothing else more.

I got to know Seraj Library Project through a friend and was fascinated by their goals, which I find very noble. As a Palestinian I feel obliged to be a part in this network, because our cultural identity is being stolen little by little and people are becoming more ignorant than before, which makes us weak. Seraj wants to protect

the Palestinian cultural heritage and educate people and make them read more and I am honored to be a part of this process, which will have a huge reflection on our cause and our struggle.”

As you can see, we have become so much more than a small children’s library. We have genuinely become a group of people connected by our common values and our goal to create these libraries; and soon, the story telling center. Our libraries have become the focal point in each village for people to meet to improve their lives and communities. And we remain connected with you. A group of dedicated people who have come out on a Sunday afternoon to hear about a project thousands of miles away; to hear the stories and see the faces of the people your contributions have supported. We are all part of the same group of people who hope for something better for our humanity, in this world that can see so much pain, the same group that truly believes every effort matters.

I would like to close here but before I do, I must tell you, the real unsung heroes of the Seraj’s work are our board members here in the US and in Palestine, some of whom volunteer more than 40 hours a week. We are grateful for your friendship and dedication and thank you for putting together such a wonderful event.

And thank you all for coming out tonight and for your continued support to the Seraj Library Project.

Dr. Estephan Salameh
October 14, 2018