

Dr. Estephan Salameh, Co-Founder
Seraj Library Project
October 15, 2017



Good evening,

I am honored to stand before you today carrying with me the hopes and dreams of the Seraj family and communities in Palestine.

I would like to thank each and every one of you for coming tonight and for your continued support and generous contributions to the Seraj Library Project. I also would like to thank our keynote speaker who traveled thousands of miles to be with us tonight. Thank you Hamid.

I bring a special greeting 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. Something to look forward to, believe me, she is a lot more interesting than I am.

This year's event is special in many ways.

As we continue to celebrate our successes here and in Palestine, with an additional new library each year (so far 8 libraries have been established and 2 more are planned for next year), more scholarship recipients (24 university students received scholarships from Seraj this fall semester), more volunteers (over 50 active volunteer from 8 libraries), more books provided to Palestinian children (37,000 books have been purchased by Seraj since 2007), more access to information, computers and internet, more cultural activities organized, and more and more friends from the US are joining the Seraj community; however, as we celebrate all this success, we mourn the loss of our friend, mentor and chair, Rev. Dr. Cotton Fite.

I remember the first time I met Cotton and Diane Fite; it was a rainy evening in 2005 at their home in Wilmette, where both of them hosted Laurie and I for a beautiful dinner. I still remember that evening as it was yesterday; we had a great conversation for over 3 hours during which Cotton asked many questions about Seraj Library Project and what Laurie and I hope to do when we moved to Palestine. Since then Cotton and Diane have been close friends and great supporters of the Seraj Library Project. In 2009, Cotton became our second chair until he passed away few weeks ago. Many of the successes I mentioned before are attributed to his great leadership, positive energy and dedication to peace and justice in Israel / Palestine.

Tonight, we are not only celebrating our successes and the great work we do together here and in Palestine, we also celebrate the life of a great man, who was an honest and committed advocate for peace and justice in a troubled world that needs our support more than any time before. This event is not the same without Cotton Fite but his departure from this world should give us more motivation to continue on path he forged with our board members and friends like you, who Laurie and I are honored to count as friends of the Seraj Library Project.

In a few minutes, I will show a short video which will give you a glimpse of our activities in Palestine. So often Laurie and I ask ourselves, what special about Seraj Libraries? Why do we do this? Why is Seraj so Important?

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. There is a quote among librarians which has become a mantra for us in our office in Ramallah, something we repeat whenever we look for new partnerships or begin a new program. "Bad libraries build collections; good libraries build services; great libraries build 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. For example, we work in a religiously conservative village where women had no public space to meet. During our grand opening of that particular library, only three attendees of the hundreds who came were women. Shortly after that the library was being used as a place for women to meet and gather during the day. Six years later, women are now running this library hand in hand with men. Recently, they asked for funding for a dabke dance trainer for the children in the village; we supported this project while encouraging them to allow both boys and girls to dance train together. It was the first time in the history of the village when this was allowed to happen.

During the last local elections in Palestine, just few months ago, in one of our villages, a woman was elected as a vice mayor because of her active role in the community through the Seraj library project.

Our scholarship program is allowing young people the chance to continue their education. Abed, a young man who received a scholarship from us in the Jordan Valley, told us before he earned the scholarship, he found himself sitting at home, depressed. Dangerously so, he said. But as part of his requirement for the scholarship he had to volunteer at our library. He

said he never knew how giving his time to help other people would make him so happy. He told us we gave him the opportunity to meet wonderful new friends and he found a hope he hadn't had before. He graduated this past May, from the Arab American University in Jenin, and while looking for work he is a regular in our library.

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 goal to create these libraries, which are actually more community centers, centers of change, that 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 night 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 in this world that can see so much pain, the same group that truly believes every effort matters.

I must tell you, the real unsung heroes of the Seraj's work are our board members here in the US, 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.

Yesterday, I had breakfast with Jim Wall, who was our first chair, but for a reason outside of his control couldn't be with us tonight. During our time together he said: I believe Seraj is fulfilling its original purpose to educate the new generation of Palestinians for the future of Palestine; A future that ensures peace and justice, stability and dignity, freedom and independence for Palestinians and a peaceful coexistence and cooperation between Palestine and Israel.

I would like to end with the words of Cotton Fite from a big event this past year, when the cubs won the World Series after 108 years. He said:
"I figure if Chicagoans can stay hopeful - never giving up - for 108 years, we and our dearest friends, the Palestinian people and all who seek peace and justice, freedom and dignity for and with them, can hang in there for as long as it takes to see it come to pass. Maybe not in my lifetime, but it will come. I believe!"

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

Dr. Estephan Salameh
Chateau Ritz