

Lighting Up Young Palestinian Lives with Books

JOHN CASSEL PHOTOS BY DR. ESTEPHAN SALAMEH

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The Seraj Library Project empowers readers in Palestinian villages.

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Helping Hands

By John Cassel Photos by Dr. Estephan Salameh

ESTEPHAN SALAMEH left Jerusalem with a scholarship to attend graduate school at North Park University in Chicago and half a month's rent in his pocket. To help pay the bills, Salameh taught Arabic to North Park students and others in the community. One of his students, Laurie Millner, who was studying for a master's degree in nonprofit management, became his wife in 2004.

The Salamehs wanted to improve the situation in Palestine, where some 5 million Palestinians live severely constrained lives under Israeli occupation. Their shared love of books kept the couple's conversation returning to the need for libraries for both children and their families. They launched the Seraj Library Project in 2005 to bring knowledge and engagement with the world to isolated villages and refugee camps in Palestine. *Seraj*, the Arabic word for oil lamp or light, was chosen as the project's symbol.

Libraries are a perfect fit in Palestine, where the culture is very family oriented, and education is highly valued. According to the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook, more than half of the West Bank and Gaza residents are under the age of 25 and more than 97 percent over the age of 15 are literate. Palestinians are a people hungry for knowledge. Sadly, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, only 3 percent of households indicate they have access to a library or the Internet after school hours.

There are now 10 community libraries in the West Bank, starting with the Jifna Library, which Seraj launched in partnership with the Jifna Women Charitable Society. Seraj U.S., an all-volunteer organization, has contributed almost \$900,000 toward the creation of those 10 libraries as well as a network of cultural programs for children and their families.

The libraries are always developed through partnerships between Seraj and a local community-based organization. Typically, the community provides the space, volunteers, and leadership; Seraj provides books, furniture, computers and experience.

This year, Seraj Palestine, now a formally recognized NGO in Palestine with its own governing board, is about to launch two major projects, one in Kufor Aqab near Jerusalem and another in Birzeit near the city of Ramallah. These represent a major innovation for the organization, and a major contribution to the cultural life of Palestine.

Storytelling has always been especially important to Seraj. In fact, all Seraj's work and activities are born out of stories—rediscovering lost ones as well as preserving both the significant and seemingly insignificant ones—to bring them to life again in Palestinian communities through the interpretation of various types of artists.

Stories tell us where we've come from and can guide us to where we are going. They tell the truth about our past so that we can begin to heal as we face the future. They connect us to those who have come before, those around us, and those yet to come.



The Seraj Library in Jiftlek, created in honor of James and Mary Wall, who helped establish the Seraj Library Project, is a cooperative effort with the village of Jiftlek, Jordan Valley Solidarity and Sanabel Al Reef women's organization. James Wall, who launched a "must-read" blog he called "Wallwritings" in 2008, died March 22, 2021. (See pp. 48-49.)

This is why Seraj's National Storytelling Center, the first of its kind in Palestine, is so exciting. Remarkably, Seraj was invited to be part of a project of the Riwaq Center for Architectural Conservation to renovate two 150-year-old houses in Kufor Aqab. Riwaq completed the renovation beautifully and gave the keys to Seraj to begin the work of furnishing and stocking the interior. These two homes will house a library, a café/study center, a small office for Seraj, and most notably, the new Storytelling Center.

Likewise, the West Bank municipality of Birzeit plans to revitalize its Old City, "activating" the area by bringing together cultural organizations, interesting small businesses and educational institutions. The municipality believes having a library

and cultural center would draw people into the historic part of the town. So, the municipality approached Seraj about opening a Library and Cultural Center.

The anchor, of course, is the libraries. There will be enough space for a children's library and a library for the college students. Right now, there is no library in Birzeit, outside of the university, and no place for the college students to go after the university closes at 4:30 p.m. In addition, Seraj plans to open a music and arts library to house pieces of art and to host music performances created by other Palestinian organizations. Something Seraj has always done well, over the past 15 years, is partner with community organizations to work cooperatively on a shared goal. Seraj's philosophy is not to compete with the work of other organizations, but to work alongside, to create something different and valuable.

Because partnership is essential to everything Seraj does, working with local organizations, families, artists, musicians and storytellers are the foundation of both the Kufor Aqab and Birzeit projects. But the fundamental partnership is between the U.S. and Palestine. Volunteers in the U.S. raise funds by describing the work and needs to a network of donors. The funds are transformed into libraries and programs by volunteers and a few staff in Palestine. Director, Laurie Salameh, and library coordinator, Fida'a Ataya (a master storyteller), have developed a wealth of expertise during their years of community library and program development.

Seraj Library Project continues to connect with interested individuals and organizations who want to be a part of this important work as they expand their circle of supporters. And, of course, visitors are always welcome to come to the various libraries throughout the West Bank.

For more information about individual libraries or for other contact information, visit <www.serajlibraries.org>.

John Cassel, an officer with Seraj, compiled this article from various Seraj sources. Estephan Salameh, who returned to Jerusalem with a Ph.D. in urban planning and public policy, teaches at Birzeit University and works as an adviser to the Palestinian Prime Minister for Planning and Aid Coordination. Laurie Salameh is on the board of World Vision Jerusalem-West Bank-Gaza.