

Articles

A Gem Besieged by Challenges

By Asma' Al-Qhoul

I never believed the influence that one single institution could have on children until my four-year-old Nasser told me one morning: "Mom, I had a dream that our house was filled with storybooks just like those at the Qattan Centre." This drove me to snatch one hour a week out of my busy schedule to read with him at the Qattan Centre for the Child in Gaza.

I got even more deeply involved when he expressed a desire to have his own membership card. Children must be at least six years old to become members, but with some wily trickery, I managed to improvise a membership card for him.

The special individualised treatment offered by the centre to each child and the confidence it imparts to children contribute to the rising impact of the centre year after

year. It has become an oasis of knowledge and solitude in an otherwise increasingly harsh and unforgiving environment – a state of affairs that may sound unbelievable to those who are not aware of what Gaza is enduring.

In a city like Gaza, which is regularly bombarded or under siege and which is also very closed, conservative, and full of complications and conflict, practicing a hobby such as reading is usually accompanied by a weird sense of guilt, as if it were a luxury that cannot be afforded while matters of greater importance surround us.

And what a talent we have shown in Gaza in creating tough and complicated memories for our children! Like my own memories in Rafah Refugee Camp during



the first Intifada when I turned away in panic as I noticed the hand of an Israeli soldier stretched out in front of me. I thought that he was about to slap me and only realised later that he was offering me a piece of candy. I remember his frustration when I refused and told him that it was probably poisoned. Just imagine my joy when I discovered that my son's dreams and memories were of shelves full of storybooks and toys! I also realise that these dreams are not restricted to my son but are shared by the tens of other kids I meet at the centre as they stand there, reading, laughing, choosing their books together, and making their own beautiful, personal histories. In this pure and innocent process, they also dismantle the boundaries of dialect, social class, and background.

Five years ago when we first saw the blue and yellow walls of this prominent and unusual architectural landmark – in a city better known for its indistinguishable grey cubical buildings – we wondered what it would bring to us. We soon discovered that the building's significance reached beyond its mere walls and modern architecture, as it has contributed to the development of the



Articles



knowledge base and self-learning habits of its users. It has also offered a model in management that is being emulated by many institutions in Gaza.

But to what extent can the centre effect real change in a society that is deeply

rooted in conservative social traditions? To what extent will it continue to fight the challenges?

I think the centre's reliance on a professional team, its trust in the inherent values of childhood, and its deep belief in the importance of art and culture allow it to reaffirm its independence in spite of the challenges posed by the system and the surrounding realities. I have no doubt that the centre will continue to reap the fruits of its work for many years to come. To demonstrate its commitment to its mission, for example, the centre has just announced the launching of the first music school in the Gaza Strip and is organising its own co-ed *dabka* group.

However, the question persists. Will the centre hold steadfast and be able to maintain its independence? Or will it succumb to the pressure of political and social extremism? This question will haunt us as long as Gaza trembles like a feather in the wind.

Zayoun Abady, Fadel Tafesh, Hiba Al-Hayek, Islam Hasuna, and Tamer Dabur are not fourteen years old yet. They all agree that the Qattan Centre helped them to explore their real talents, gave them a lot of confidence, and filled their days with passion – a passion that made my son dream that his home had turned into a sea of stories.

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