

Friends Schools Newsletter

Winter 2011



Smashing Success: Go Palestine's Inaugural Year

By Sa'ed Atshan, Go Palestine Director



Sa'ed Atshan (left), with the campers in front of Birzeit University on one of their field trips.

Sa'ed Atshan is a graduate of Ramallah Friends School and Westtown School. He completed his undergraduate degree at Swarthmore College and is presently a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University.

What do the following teenagers have in common: Basel from Amman, Gabriel from Michigan, Leila from South Korea, Omar from Dubai, Ramsey from Virginia, Moody from Haifa, Nimer from Maine, Nisreen from Texas, Robin from Scotland, Saad from Nablus, Samer from Bahrain, Tala from California, Tammy from Ramallah, and Yasmeen from London? They are all youth who participated in the inaugural Go Palestine Summer Camp hosted by the Ramallah Friends School this past July. We are delighted to report that the program was an astounding success!

The main purpose of Go Palestine was to connect young people from the Palestinian Diaspora with their ancestral homeland. With 40 participants, half of whom were selected from the Friends School, local campers served as host families to the international campers. Living with Palestinian families provided the youth from abroad with an intimate understanding of the warmth and hospitality that runs deep in Ramallah and across Palestine.

Over the course of three weeks, campers enjoyed the beauty of the Friends School campus and the immense facilities and resources it has to offer. The multi-faceted program included arts, bowling, *dabkeh* (dance), hiking, music, sports, swimming, theater, yoga, and a circus and juggling workshop.

The campers watched many documentaries and movies as part of the Go Palestine film festival. These included *Amreeka*, *Budrus*, *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*, *Jerusalem: East Side Story*, *Occupation 101*, *Paradise Now*, and *Slingshot Hip Hop*.

The most important element of camp was the community service component. The students worked with the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions to help rebuild a home demolished

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RFS Director's Office

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RFS graduating class of 2011

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Nothing moved the campers as much as the trips to Jerusalem and Haifa. They loved standing on top of the Mount of Olives...

by the Israeli military in Anata outside of Jerusalem. The campers met the family and celebrated with them at a ceremony when the home was complete. We also worked with agricultural projects at the Tent of Nations outside of Bethlehem—a farm surrounded by settlements where volunteers from around the world assist a Palestinian family in remaining steadfast on their land. Additionally, the campers partnered with Inspire Dreams, an organization empowering Palestinian refugee youth, in the Askar Camp in Nablus and the Jalazone Camp in Ramallah. Our students planted trees, painted walls, played with children, collected trash, and got to know their counterparts from the refugee camps.

A significant time during Go Palestine was also devoted to field trips. Whether visiting the Aida refugee camp, Church of the Nativity, and the Wall in Bethlehem—or the settlement, old market, and glassblowing factory in Hebron—the campers experienced Palestine with all of their senses. They tasted *musakhan* at the Falaha restaurant in Ein Areek, toured the Coca Cola factory in Ramallah's industrial district, and visited the tomb of Yasser Arafat. In Birzeit, they met students from the Right to Education Campaign and attended a Palestinian fashion exhibition at Birzeit University. The campers also took in the stunning sites of Aboud and Geir Ghassaneh villages and later ate and swam in Jifna. The visit to Taybeh included learning about the Palestinian economy from the mayor.

Nothing moved the campers as much as the trips to Jerusalem and Haifa. They loved standing on top of the Mount of Olives, as well as walking through the Old City to see Christian and Muslim sites, taking pictures on the roof of the Austrian Hospice, shopping for souvenirs, and enjoying parsley-filled *falafel*. In Haifa, they toured the Bahai Gardens, met with members of the Baladna Arab Youth Association, swam in the Mediterranean, Zumba danced, and had a festive outdoor dinner after sunset.

More highlights included the Edward Said National Conservatory in Ramallah and the tour of newly liberated lands in Bilin as well as meetings with activists from the village. The trip to Nablus started with a tour of Masri Palace led by Munib Masri, as well as visits to the Cultural Heritage Enrichment Center, walking around the Old City with its soap factories and Turkish bathhouses. We devoured *knafeh*. Jacob's Well, in addition to Sabastia's Roman ruins, blew our breath away!

A talent show with families in attendance allowed camp to end on a high note. All of this, including the multiple scholarships we provided to campers with financial need, would not have been possible without the generous contributions of supporters, as well as the team of staff and counselors who worked conscientiously.

Learn more at www.summerinpalestine.org, <http://gopalestine.posterous.com/>, and check out camp videos at <http://vimeo.com/27660712>.



New School Principal for the Lower School (FGS)

The Friends School is very pleased to announce the appointment of Dr. Hendrik Taatgen as Lower School Principal. Dr. Taatgen started his career in international education administration in the fall of 2001 at an American school in Egypt. From 2002-2005, he was middle and high school principal at the International Programs School (IPS) in Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia. For the 2005-2006 school year, he was director of the American International School in Gaza (AISG), after which he returned to IPS to head the school for five years until the summer of 2011.

A Dutch citizen with a Ph.D. in Anthropology from SUNY at Stony Brook, Dr. Taatgen has spent equal parts of his adult life on three different continents. He was awarded his doctoral degree for two years of field research in a rural community in the Republic of Ireland, and has taught for many years at Indiana University and Chapman University College. His publications include articles on Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, Community Policing in Washington State, and International School Leadership in Gaza.

Dr. Taatgen brings substantial experience in academics to his new post. He is very knowledgeable and experienced in modern pedagogy and will be responsible for working with the administrative team at the FGS on improving the quality of education to better meet international standards. Dr. Taatgen will support teacher development and will be taking a closer look at improving our curricula. He will be an important member of the Executive Committee and the Board of Trustees. Thank you for joining us in welcoming Hendrik.



*Hendrik Taatgen, FGS Principal,
with the Kindergarten kids at
the Lower School.*

Back in Palestine

By Hendrik Taatgen, Lower School Principal

It is good to be back in Palestine; even better to be at the Lower School (FGS) in Ramallah. Five years ago, my wife Marga and I worked at the American International School in Gaza. Our time in Gaza was an unforgettable experience for living lives with an intensity we had not known before. Almost no day would go by without an event threatening to wreck our nerves. We experienced violence in many of its manifestations, including the continuously reiterated “might is right” effect of an Israeli fighter jet’s sonic boom in the aftermath of the settler pullout.

Being thrown in with the target population, however, activated our senses also to more positive effects. Through empathy, we discovered the meaning of solidarity, which only intensified over the years. Yes, we had to leave Gaza after that year. Our lives were increasingly endangered, and we had no intention to push our luck. But when our former school was bombed in January 2008, I knew one day I would return to Palestine for a longer stay. So here I am—this time not in Gaza, but in Ramallah.

My first impressions of Ramallah are uplifting. Walking the streets of this small town is nothing like what it was when I visited in 2005 or even in 2008. There is construction everywhere and much increased traffic of pedestrians and cars. Lots of energy has converged from outside onto this capital town, giving it a vibrancy and liveliness unmatched by many other places in the Middle East. It is an exciting place to be, where I look forward to contributing my small part to the building of a new Palestinian society.



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Lower School News in Brief

By Hendrik Taatgen, Lower School Principal

The Lower School (FGS) has started the 2011-2012 academic year in an upbeat mood. Many things happened in the past months to position the school for success in the near future and the years to come, including initiatives in the areas of construction, staffing, and curriculum development.



New Preschool

Before the summer, work had started on the construction of a new preschool. When the project is finished, the building will house four lower and four upper classes of preschoolers who will be taught by a well-trained staff. Our goal was to complete the four lower classes before the beginning of the year, and I am happy to say that we made it, albeit barely!

Painting and Landscaping

Another summer project we completed in time for school to start was the painting of all classrooms in the Shaheen and Whittier buildings. Elementary students will now be taught in much brighter environments. To provide for safer student play during recess, the steep-sloped area between the basketball court and the main gate has been undergoing major landscaping. The final product will be a terraced area of niches, corners, and seating areas, but safety concerns have prompted us to thoroughly review every step in the construction process, causing some delay. We expect the project to be completed in October.



Staff

On the staffing front, we have said goodbye to some, and welcomed others. Among the newcomers are eight teachers, teaching assistants, and a principal. Teachers are, of course, at the very core of our educational efforts, and at FGS they are supported by three office staff, a learning support team, counselor, information technology (IT) manager, four department coordinators, two academic heads, and the Administrative Team, consisting of the principal, deputy principal, academic heads, learning support coordinator, and counselor.

Curriculum

The goal of life-long learning demands that teachers never stop asking themselves how to better serve their students. In this spirit, we educators at FGS have agreed to take a hard look at our curriculum and improve on it to meet the twenty-first century learning needs of our students. We will make a major effort to enhance student writing and encourage student reading, both in Arabic and in English. And for many of these programs we count on the support and help of parents.



Top: Lower School students enjoy school recess time. Above: Kindergarten kids enjoy class with their teacher in the new Kindergarten building. Below: Lower school teachers attend a workshop that was held at the beginning of the school year.



Some Dreams Do Come True

By Joyce Ajlouny, RFS Director

As I write this, news channels are reporting on the Palestinian Prime Minister's bid at the United Nations to upgrade the status of our international representation to a full-fledged state at the UN. While we all know that this is indeed a "symbolic" act, leaving the desperate situation on the ground unchanged, we are also exuberant knowing that the majority of the countries around the globe are enthusiastically supporting our just cause. Major cities including Ramallah saw much street activity during the past week with thousands demonstrating in support of their international legitimacy and right to statehood. Israeli settlers have intensified their actions with several reports indicating a heightened level of violence from settlers against Palestinian villagers. Our students have taken part in several activities in support of (and on some cases against) the UN bid and a healthy debate emerged. Despite the odds of success, this is an historic time for Palestine. We hope soon we will see Palestine back on the map again after 63 years of its disappearing. Thank you for your continued prayers for peace and justice in our land.

While we dream of a state to call our own, our Ramallah Friends School community continues to dream about improving our educational program. We are grateful that some of our dreams do come true and this newsletter spells out several of those. For one, our five-year old youngsters entered their new classroom building on their first day back to school this September. Thanks to the efforts of our Engineering team and the school staff, the first floor of the new Kindergarten building is now complete. Students, teachers, and parents are delighted to now have access to a new welcoming, sunny, airy, and spacious educational facility. Thanks to the support of the Arab Fund for Social and Economic Development (a total of \$576,000) and our alumni and Friends in Dubai and abroad, the Kindergarten building and hall will be completed by June. The building includes three floors (Lower Kindergarten, Upper Kindergarten, assembly/multi-purpose hall).

It gives me great pleasure to also announce that USAID/ASHA responded positively and very significantly to our grant application of 2010 and approved the amount of \$1,000,000 for the Upper School (FBS) campus development. Our Board of Trustees and its Building Committee are working hard to plan for the proper implementation of this grant which will primarily aim at increasing the number of total students and decreasing the number of students per classroom.

Regardless of our diplomatic successes or failures in establishing the State of Palestine, our calling remains strong and dreams remain alive as we collectively serve a well-deserving community of Palestinian youth. Thank you all for your support.

A happy student on her first day of school in the new Kindergarten building.



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Towards Implementing the IB Middle Years Program

By Mahmoud Amra, Upper School Principal



Upper School students use the library that was moved into the main building to make it more accessible.

The Upper School (FBS) adopted the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB DP) in 1999. Since its implementation nearly 500 students have graduated from the program. Following its commitment to the IB DP, the school, in 2004-2005, made the decision to consider implementing the IB Middle Years Program (IB MYP) as a means of preparing its middle grade students for the academic challenge of the IB DP. Another reason for implementing the program is that the program uses a variety of teaching and learning strategies, which help to produce an atmosphere where students discover how they learn best in different contexts.

With the adoption of the IB DP and planning to implement the MYP, the school has upgraded a number of its exist-

ing facilities, including the procurement of new science and technology equipment and library resources. A new building houses three science laboratories, two art studios, an auditorium, and several classrooms. The school has a number of sports fields and a multi-purpose hall which can seat 350. In addition, the school built new classrooms and provided every teacher with his/her own classroom to be designed to serve the subject taught. Last summer, the library and computer laboratories were moved to the classroom buildings to make them more accessible to students as well as to teachers.

To prepare for the adoption of the MYP, most of the teachers attended official workshops organized by the International Baccalaureate organization in Basel, Brussels, and Amman. Trained MYP teachers are acting now as mentors to their subject colleagues who have yet to receive official training. The school is committed to sending more of its teachers to IB MYP workshops for training. The MYP coordinator teacher, Mohammad Habbas, is regarded as an invaluable source of information and has provided much support for those teachers new to the program, particularly in those subject groups which do not have department heads. During last year and at the beginning of this school year Mohammad presented several workshops for teachers. There are also several procedures in place to ensure that parents are kept informed about the program and to promote their knowledge and understanding of key program components.



Upper School News in Brief

By Mahmoud Amra, Upper School Principal

Due to the high demand at the school, it was decided to open a new 7th grade section this year to admit twenty new students in this grade. The number of students at the Upper School (554) is the highest ever and still many applicants were turned down because of the lack of vacancies. The main reasons for this increasing demand are: the Quaker values of the school, the long and successful history, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program, the IB Middle Years Program, the college counseling program which provides many opportunities for college admission, and the emphasis on helping students in developing well-rounded personalities.

Summer 2011 Programs

The Upper School organized two major programs during the summer. For the first time the school organized a five-week program for students in grades 10 and 11 to prepare them for the SAT. Three specialized teachers from the U.S. worked with over 50 students on developing the skills needed for the exams.

Photo at right: 7th graders present their projects during Ethics class.

Far right: Upper School teachers attend a workshop at the beginning of the school year.

In addition, students were introduced to the process of applying to U.S. colleges and universities. The second major event was the Go Palestine Summer Camp (see article on page 1).

Participating in MUN Conferences

The participation of Upper School students in Model United Nations (MUN) conferences is growing to become a tradition. This year, the members of the MUN club at the school worked all through the summer preparing for the first MUN conference in Palestine. The conference took place on October 7-9 on the school campus with participants from different schools in Palestine. In addition, many of our students are competing to participate in three international MUN conferences abroad. One of those conferences will be in India.

Student Exchange Program

The school was once again proud to announce scholarship exchange program opportunities in partnership with West-

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*Donate either to the General Award Fund (partial, any amount) or ESJ Award Fund (full). Tuition fees for 2011-2012 range from U.S. \$2,000 to \$2,700.

For further information and inquiries, feel free to contact our office at development@palfriends.org or Tel: +972-2-295-2286, www.palfriends.org.

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town School, Sidwell Friends School, and Penn Charter School. These three Quaker Schools have generously offered to accept one student each and to provide scholarships for them to spend the academic year 2011-2012. All three students safely arrived in the U.S. and have started school.

Student Council

One of the highlights of every school year is the election of a new Student Council. The process itself is of great value. Four students are nominated for the presidency: Rami Bargh-



outi, Abdelrahman Abdallah, Rahaf Khawaja, and Lujain Obaidat. They were all given the opportunity to speak to the student body about their goals and vision. All students will have the opportunity to vote.

Back-to-School Bonfire

In cooperation with the Student Council, the back-to-school bonfire took place on September 29. Hundreds of students participated in this activity which included music and games.





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Students from Ramallah Friends School and other schools participate in the Model United Nations (MUN) conference held in Palestine this year (see page 6).

Donor Thanks

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March 1 – October 1, 2011

We would like to thank the following people and their meetings for their recent donations to Ramallah Friends Schools.

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