

Friends Schools Newsletter

Winter 2008



Amari Play Center Reviewed

By Lindsey Cook

I am a Quaker currently conducting a review of the Quaker-sponsored play center in Al-Amari Refugee Camp.

I am working as a team with Vanoush Kassis, a Ramallah-based education specialist. Twenty-one years ago we taught together at the lower school (FGS) in Ramallah. I was 24 years old and ignorant of the land where I was to teach. But Friends United Meeting (FUM) had faith in me, and sponsored my work for two years.

In 1987, I taught classes in ethics, math, English and physical education to eager and bright, young Palestinian girls. Within months, the first intifada erupted. Fear filled the streets and Israel closed the schools, banning education to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Rather than sit in my apartment, my fellow FUM-sponsored teacher, Sandra Gass, and I began teaching English for free in nearby Palestinian refugee camps.

I chose the Amari Refugee Camp, to which I could walk from Ramallah. The camp was, and remains, identified by its poverty and concentrated living quarters. I gathered together a group of Palestinian refugee girls and began teaching English, dodging the Israeli Army units that patrolled the narrow alleys. Anyone throwing stones could be shot, and anyone caught teaching could be arrested.

Over the years I returned to work with the United Nations in the West Bank and Gaza. For this review, I have returned to the camp where I first understood the depth of hardship in Palestine.



Al-Amari Camp is home to nearly 7,000 people. The families are refugees from 1948. Elderly residents will describe for you the villages where they were raised, villages which are now part of Israel but to which these refugees are not allowed to return. Their current homes are made of cinder block and are separated between narrow alleys. In Al-Amari, unemployment is high. An average salary for those with a job is approximately \$375 a month. The cost of living is high, with a loaf of bread costing \$1.70 and a tube of toothpaste \$3. The health of the economy is dependent upon Israel. Israel restricts movement of Palestinians and goods both in and out of the West Bank, as well as within the West Bank. Most Palestinians have not been allowed to visit Jerusalem in years. The Israeli sealing of Gazan borders has resulted in a humanitarian crisis.

The play center was established by European Quakers over 30 years ago to support pre-school education for the poorest of the poor. Pre-school education was once unusual, but has recently become viewed by Palestinian parents as essential. The Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Education

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Left to right: Lindsey Cook, Muna Khleifi and Vanoush Kassis

has no money for a national pre-school education system, so private kindergartens have blossomed and charge up to \$500 a year per child. The Amari Play Center, however, holds to its original vision, accepting only refugee children and withdrawing the annual charge of \$25 a year for special hardship cases.

The project is managed by the Europe and Middle East Section of the Friends World Committee for Consultation. It is supported by donations from Quakers worldwide, including funds from American Quakers channelled through Friends United Meeting. The director of the Friends Schools in Ramallah, an FUM-sponsored post, oversees the local management of the project.

Quaker donations pay for one teacher, two assistants (all of whom originate from the Camp) and a part-time supervisor, books, supplies, electricity, heating and toys. The United Nations Refugee and Works Agency (UNRWA) acts as a "protective wing" for the project, offering rent-free location when possible. In 2004, UNRWA built a new girls school which incorporated the play center. The area has enough space for 40 children, and consists of one classroom, a small courtyard, a sandy play area and a little side play room. UNRWA values its relationship with Quakers and would welcome more pre-school initiatives were we to find the funding and UNRWA to identify unused space.

Our review will examine these and many other issues, from governance and management, staffing, location, funding and educational content and delivery. We will complete the review in December. For now, we wish to thank those readers who have supported this project over the years. It is not only a highly respected play center, but a project in which Quakers can reach the poorest of the poor.

News from the Lower School (FGS)

By Diana Abdel Nour, Lower School Principal

Early this year, the lower school (FGS) family was saddened by the death of two members. Aida Karkar was diagnosed with cancer just a month before her death. Aida had served the school conscientiously for 33 years and was to begin her retirement. A week after Aida we lost Osama Bishtawi, a second-grade student, in a car accident. We miss them sorely.

For the second year, the school has been able to open its doors to more children with challenging needs and provide opportunities to ensure their basic right in a mainstream school. To facilitate their inclusion and education, new university graduates were hired on a semi-voluntary basis. This was made possible only by the kind donations from individuals who believe in the right of children with special needs.

As of mid October our students have started donating money for the white gifts program. Bake sales are held on Saturdays, one grade level at a time, to sell for the benefit of the program. Students and their parents donate the food. All proceeds will be distributed to the poor around Christmas time.

During the first quarter, our fourth grade students sat for standardized tests in mathematics and science. These tests were conducted by AMIDEAST and were given to fourth graders in 20 private schools in the West Bank. The results revealed that the lower school scores were much higher than the average of the target schools' averages. The highest grade achieved in science among all schools was by one of our students.

Our special education coordinator, Salma Khalidi, participated in an international conference for the Enabling Educational Network in Manchester, U.K., as a steering group member early in September. E.E.Net is an international educational network for sharing information and experiences on inclusive education.



Special needs students are also included in sports activities.

Lower School (FGS) Growth and Development

By Diana Abdel Nour, Lower School Principal

On August 23, 2008, the Friends lower school family began a new school year. The lower school welcomed its 656 students, an increase of 20 students from last year in an attempt to accommodate more families and to help support our budget. Over 100 new students joined the school. Over twice as many were turned away for lack of space.

Teachers started a week earlier than students and attended a number of workshops and meetings in preparation for the school year. As in previous years, we jointly set the objectives for the year:

- upgrading methods of assessment for students
- empowering the spirit of teamwork among staff
- promoting critical thinking among students
- encouraging healthy habits of diet
- teaching positive means for problem solving

The school has introduced a no junk food policy to encourage healthy food and raise awareness about good eating habits. The students now eat in class at their desks while their teachers monitor the students' food and implement the policy. In addition, the lower school adopted another policy that attempts to encourage a healthier world, enforcing that no plastic bags or bottles be brought to the campus with the students' food. These policies further emphasize the lower schools efforts at being an environmentally friendly school.

This year, each class is assigned one period per week for problem solving. This complements last year's efforts in which all teachers were trained the entire academic year by Mona Halaby, an educator and consultant from the United States to conduct problem solving with the students. This year each homeroom teacher practices problem solving with her class while the school's counselor, Adele Jaraiseh, monitors their work. It is a process meant to teach our children how to solve their problems peacefully.

We strive to instill certain life skills in the students at an early age. It is imperative for them to develop their social and emotional skills while they practice a hobby or activity they enjoy and choose. The after school program offers a variety of activities which range from karate to choir, yoga, aerobics, soccer, basketball, modern dance, debkeh, home economics, art, computer and drama. Such activities offer a space to help students develop their diverse personality skills.

During the summer holiday, the school, for the second year in a row, sent five teachers to the international baccalaureate school in Jordan to attend a six-day workshop. The workshop focused on assessment, teaching methods, time management and organizational skills.

Professional development for school teachers is a very important aspect of the school. This year seven lower school teachers and the principal are participating in a long-term teacher training conducted by AMIDEAST (America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, Inc.): The Model Schools Network Program (MSN), which is a USAID project administered by AMIDEAST aiming to improve students' learning outcomes and school facilities in 20 schools from Ramallah to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron and Jericho. The objective of the program is to strengthen the overall quality of the targeted schools (with seven or eight teachers from each school) so they become models of innovative teacher performances and achievement. MSN will develop a model schools network by focusing on four areas: professional development, physical capacity building, professional networking and student and community integration. The program focuses on the areas of math, English and science. We hope our participating teachers will benefit immensely from this program and will be able to reflect this knowledge not only for students but also for other Ramallah Friends Schools teachers.

Kindergarten News

By Duha Masri,
Head of Kindergarten

Parent Participation

A group of parents who are dentists volunteered to perform a check-up for the children as a preventative measure.

Social Awareness

The main component of social awareness is the recognition and identification of feelings in others. Young children who understand other children's emotions have more positive peer relationships. Based on this, our school had the opportunity to exchange gifts with both the Kreish foundation and the School for the Blind. We also took the kindergarteners on a field trip to Jifna village where they helped in olive picking.



Community Responsibility

Our kindergarteners assisted in organizing a workshop with the Ramallah Municipality and al kaykab botanical garden for the preschool teachers in the Governance of Ramallah. The purpose was to raise awareness about the environment and its elements, as well as about pollution, its causes and how to stop it.

News in Brief

Ramallah Friends Schools (RFS) Board of Trustees member Dr. Ghassan Khatib concluded his membership after over seven years of dedicated service. Ghassan initiated his active involvement as a committed parent and by being instrumental in establishing the first Parent-Teacher Association at the school over a decade ago. His active engagement and commitment to the RFS community exemplified the real face of service. Despite busy schedules, especially during his appointments as Palestinian Minister of Planning and later Minister of Labor, Ghassan rarely missed a board meeting. Ghassan will be remembered most for his wisdom, unwavering care, focused vision and objective opinions, particularly during difficult staff and board negotiations. (see picture of dinner)



Above, left to right: Dr. Ghassan Khatib and Samer Shehadeh (Board of Trustees Clerk)

Allyn Dhynes, also a member of the RFS Board of Trustees, concluded his three years of service as a board member. Allyn, a former RFS teacher, provided an important Quaker connection to the Board of Trustees. His calm and wise interventions and ideas will be missed.

Below: Board of Trustees dinner

Tenth-grade students completed Quaker Faith and Practice studies with their teacher, Stephen Lassiter (North Carolina, USA, Friend). The course culminated in the students' attendance of the Ramallah Monthly Meeting for Worship during two different Sundays. Students spoke positively of their experience and seemed to enjoy the real exposure to Quakerism. (see picture)



Ramallah Monthly Meeting revived the traditional Sunday school for children, thanks to the efforts of the Friends International Center in Ramallah. The few remaining Ramallah Quaker families enthusiastically sent their children to take part in the Sunday morning that we hope will soon attract other members of the community. The Quaker Sunday school had been a Ramallah landmark over three decades ago.

RFS received many admissions representatives from various U.S. colleges and universities, including Swarthmore College, Boston University and Yale University. (see picture)



Our infrastructure development projects have been progressing with much hard work and enthusiasm from the community. To date, we have accomplished the following:

Above: RFS 10th graders at Ramallah Friends Meeting for Worship

- Replaced the new boundary walls surrounding the entire school properties, including gates and fences.
- The upper school (FBS) Khalil Totah Auditorium was renovated thanks to the support of the USAID/ASHA program. This project replaced tiles, installed a new heating and air-conditioning system, enlarged the stage, installed new audio/visual equipment and replaced the seating. The auditorium renovation, to everyone's delight, respected and maintained the same spirit and aesthetics of the old space.

Below: Yale University representative speaks to students



- Also thanks to USAID/ASHA our new classroom building broke ground in October 2008. (see picture) This new classroom building was designed with Quaker simplicity in mind. The building will include nine classrooms and one student lounge and will be dedicated to our middle school students of grades 7-8.
- That same ASHA grant will also upgrade our electricity system in FBS, as well as make our campus safer through the building of new ramps and pathways.
- Our tennis court is getting an overhaul thanks to the generous sponsorship of The Bank of Palestine and the personal donations of some of the tennis enthusiasts in town.
- Construction on the lower school (FGS) new kindergarten building and auditorium has come to a halt due to the unavailability of additional funds. The building requires over one million dollars to complete. To date, only \$550,000 has been secured. RFS has high hopes that the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development – the original supporters of our project – will seriously consider our request for further support. A decision is expected by the end of the year.
- Our sports field will be the first school green field in Palestine. Finally, our students and the community children will be able to exercise their sport on soft, artificial turf rather than the harsh concrete. A USAID/ARD grant was approved for \$233,750 to install the artificial turf. Our community is waiting anxiously in hopes of using the field by early winter. The school is looking for funding that will allow us to install a track around the field.
- USAID/ASHA approved yet another grant for commodities at FBS. Funds will be used to pay for new desks, IT classroom technologies, etc.



FBS new building site
 Left to right: Mazen Karam (RFS Board member), Shadi Othman (RFS Engineer),
 Joyce Ajlouny (RFS Director), Amer Saffarini (Project Architect),
 Mahmoud Amra (FBS Principal) and Jad Abdallah (Contractor)



Social Studies

*By Sabrina Tamimi,
 Social Studies Teacher*

Social studies can be one of the most boring, as well as one of the most interesting and enjoyable, classes. As a student, I liked social studies but not the way my teachers taught. They used to give us tons of information and expect us to memorize all the names and dates. Keeping my learning experience in mind, I decided to teach my social studies classes in a way that engages students actively in the learning process and develops their critical thinking skills. My teaching is mostly project-based. During most of my classes, the students work in groups on projects which require them to collect data, analyze it and present it to the entire class using drama or multimedia skills.

My Year at Westtown School

By Mayse Jarbawi, Grade 11 IB

Westtown School is probably the best thing that has ever happened to me. It was exactly what I needed. When I think of Westtown now, it makes me feel sad that it's all just a memory that makes up a huge part of who I am and what I believe. Sometimes when I'm alone I find myself thinking, "Why did it have to end?"



Mayse (front, center) with friends from Westtown

When I first arrived, I didn't like the school that much. It was very difficult for me to learn how to adjust and live in an extremely different way. I cried myself to sleep many nights. I was always missing home and wanting to return to my family and friends. I spent the first few months going from my dorm room to my classes, from my classes to the athletics center and dining room, then back to my dorm room to call home.

That routine changed though. I learned to break that wall I always put up for myself. I just let myself go, didn't allow myself to worry about what people might think or say or how they might judge who I am. Breaking the barrier changed my entire life. It showed me that it's okay to take chances. Things may go wrong, but that's how you learn.

I became part of the Westtown community. Westtown is very family oriented, even when it comes to eating breakfast, lunch and dinner: It brings all the students together and creates a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Westtown is also a very diverse place. My closest friends were from Jamaica, Spain, Germany, Britain and the United States. I made amazing friends that I am still in contact with today.

Westtown taught me a lot about Quakerism. It showed me that it's a way of life that seeks peace, simplicity and fairness. Being a Palestinian was difficult at times – I come from a completely different world. On the other hand, people were very friendly and interested in knowing about where I come from and what it is like. Towards the end, there was a complete change in the community as they knew more about the tough situation in Palestine and what it's like to live there.

Westtown helped me grow; I learned how to deal with life on my own. It taught me how to organize my time, handle responsibility, organize myself and be independent. Westtown is one of my favorite experiences. I would give anything just to go back for one day. It's hard to know that it's over, but I am so thankful that I got the chance to be a part of that community.



Friends School Class of 2008

Upper School (FBS) News

By Mahmoud Amra, Upper School Principal

Left to right: Stephen Lassiter (teacher), students Taleen and Tareq (last year's exchange students at Sidwell and Westtown) and Brian Phelps (college counselor)



The number of students at the Friends upper school this year (521) is the highest ever. Many applicants were turned away due to the lack of vacancies. It is apparent that the demand at the school is increasing year to year, especially in grades 9–11. The main reasons for this increasing demand are: the school's Quaker values, a long and successful history, the international baccalaureate diploma program, the college counseling program which provides many opportunities for college admission and the emphasis on helping students develop well-rounded personalities.

The 2007-08 school year was marked with many accomplishments and activities that enhanced the growth and development of students. The participation of upper school students in Model United Nations (MUN) conferences is growing each year and has become a tradition. This year, 12 students will participate in the MUN conference taking place in Amman, Jordan. Another six will go in January 2009 to Doha, Qatar; and six more students will participate in an MUN conference in Istanbul.

The upper school was once again proud to announce scholarship exchange program opportunities in partnership with Westtown School, Pennsylvania; Sidwell Friends School, Washington D.C.; and, for the first time, William Penn Charter School, Pennsylvania. These three Quaker schools have generously offered to accept one student each and to provide scholarships for them to spend an academic year abroad. Our

students, Tamer Saadeh, Alexandra Mukhtar and Razan Anabtawi are now attending those schools and the feedback we are receiving from them as well as from their teachers is very positive. Our students who attended Sidwell, Westtown and George School (Pennsylvania) last year are now back at Ramallah Friends Schools. They shared with the students of the school their wonderful experience abroad.

Another highlight of the school year was the election of a new student council president. The process itself was of great value. Two students were nominated: Hana Awwad and Fadi Tu'meh. They were both given the opportunity to speak to the student body about their goals and vision. All students participated and Fadi won the election. The student council organized several activities last year: a demonstration to protest the siege on Gaza, participation in various community activities to commemorate Land Day and the "Nakbeh." The council also raised funds to furnish a students' lounge.

Finally, the yearly performance of the folk dance (debkeh) group is always a major event. The group performed at the cultural palace last November in Ramallah for an audience of close to 1,000.

Participate in the future of the Friends School, with your tax-deductible gifts!



Yes, I would like to contribute to the Ramallah Friends Schools:

Scholarships and Child sponsorship*

General Award (any amount) \$ _____

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U.S. \$ Gifts: Tax-deductible gifts should be made payable to the Ramallah Friends School and sent to: **Global Ministries, Friends United Meeting, 101 Quaker Hill Drive, Richmond, IN 47374-1926**

Sterling (£) Gifts: should be made payable to the Quaker International Educational Trust (QuIET), noting "for Ramallah" on the back and saying if Gift Aid may be claimed, and sent to: QuIET, Yew Tree House, Church Street, Bloxham, Banbury, OX15 4ET or Brian Morphy at QuIET, Tel: 01295 720019; e-mail: brianmorphy@hvmail.co.uk.

*Donate either to the General Award Fund (partial, any amount) or ESJ Award Fund (full). Tuition fees for 2008–2009 range from U.S. \$1,800 to U.S. \$2,630.

For further information and inquiries feel free to contact Jumana Thalji in the Director's Office at jthalji@palfriends.org or Tel: 011-972-2-2952286, www.palfriends.org



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April 1–September 30, 2008

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

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