

Friends Schools Newsletter

Spring 2009



Everything Old is New Again: Many Faces, Changing Spaces

By Joyce Ajlouny, Ramallah Friends Schools Director

Ramallah Friends Schools' upper school is in the midst of some great changes. Through a generous grant made by USAID/ASHA, a new classroom building is being constructed, the auditorium has received a much needed facelift, a new parking lot has been added and walkways have been resurfaced to enhance safety (read more about these projects in Mahmoud Amra's article). These projects have been a major undertaking and our entire school community is looking forward to their completion. As we watch the dust clear and the projects take shape, a key theme emerges: blending the old with the new and breathing new life into the old. Many people are involved with this project, including the architect, engineer and skilled laborer; all who work together to ensure that the end result will not only be functional and attractive to look at, but also keep to our key values: simplicity and environmental stewardship.

"My designs center around the idea that more is less and less is more," Amer Saffarini of Saffarini & Associates stated in a recent meeting. His firm has worked with the Friends School since 1993 on various projects, each requiring designs that allow for modern function but also blend with the spirit of the original buildings. One of the most appealing aspects of Amer's designs is his use of local materials.



Amer Saffarini, architect

Amer says he enjoys working on projects with his alma mater (class of 1982) because he has always had such a positive feeling about his education: "The Friends School teaches you how to keep on learning throughout your life."

Another Friends School alumnus who has been instrumental in the new construction projects is Shadi Othman (class of 1995). Shadi has been an engineer for 10 years, working for various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Ramallah. When asked about the current project, Shadi said, "I love exploring new ways of doing

things; this project is a result of collective thoughts and interactive dialogue in which everyone is involved in making decisions." His job includes coordinating and supervising the construction team, overseeing the project's budget and working directly with the construction and landscaping teams to guarantee quality control.

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Editor: Rebecca Mason,
RFS Development Officer



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One of the many members of this team is Walid Idris Taweel, a native of El-Bireh who has become one of the familiar faces around the school as the project progresses. Walid is a professional *sinsila*, or stone builder, a trade that is part of Palestinian cultural heritage and a key element in the design of all our buildings. Having learned the trade from his father 20 years ago, Walid has been creating beautiful and enduring stone structures in the Ramallah area ever since. His team is responsible for creating the stone walls, pathways and landscaping structures surrounding the new construction. His team's beautiful work has impressed everyone who passes by. The stones that Walid's crew are utilizing for our current project come from one of our large water wells which was also refurbished as part of this project, an aspect that appeals to our core belief in simplicity through the recycling of old materials to give them new purpose.

We look forward to the completion of this important project. Not only will these changes provide the necessary upgrades to continue our pioneering approach to education, but they will also harmonize with our school's original buildings, blending the old with the new.



*Top, left: Walid Idris Taweel, sinsila builder;
bottom, left: Shadi Othman (left), engineer, with
Hani Hasan (right), architect for landscaping works*

Learning English in a Petting Zoo

*By Knar Mardirossian,
Kindergarten English Teacher*

The month of March was very busy and exciting for our preschool children. The theme in our English language program was "The Farm". The children were introduced to different farm animals and their babies, as well as the farm's agricultural produce. The Farm theme was culminated with a field trip to a petting zoo, where the children had a lot of fun trying to identify and guess what animal they would see next. This gave the children the chance to develop and practice their oral language by showing off what they had learned in class.

RFS Kindergarten: A Model for Other Schools

By Duha Al-Masri, Head of Preschool

Ramallah Friends Schools' kindergarten program has always sought to introduce techniques into the classroom that are not only educational but also have real-world implications. We firmly believe in education across the curriculum, which means that a general theme or subject is integrated into all areas of study.

Reduce-Reuse-Recycle

In the past few years, our Environmental Awareness program has seen real success in our school as well as in other local schools. The main objective is to encourage children to modify behaviors and educate others about environmental issues. Using the simple "reduce-reuse-recycle" model, math, science and reading lessons incorporate different environmental aspects, which provide a common thread that weaves itself throughout all of their courses. Composters are used daily and students eventually use this compost for growing their own plants from seeds, teaching them from beginning to end how the process works. This program was developed and piloted in our school and, after its initial success, teachers from other area schools were trained. Currently, 10 area schools have adopted this program and are in the process of developing the program for implementation in elementary grades.

We created an educational DVD which shows how teachers and parents can integrate environmental education into simple, everyday experiments. We have also created a short animated film to teach kids the importance of protecting the environment. Our students made paper cut-outs for the film and a local crew assisted with the technical aspects.

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King of the Jungle

Our latest program deals with teaching kindergarteners about the democratic process through mock-elections. Each classroom nominates an animal as a candidate for “King of the Jungle.” They create a platform and campaign posters which demonstrate why their animal should be elected. Science classes include the study of all the “candidates” and math classes involve learning percentages and fractions related to the election. Parents volunteer to work at “polling locations” on our election day, and students register, are given a ballot and cast their vote in a booth. The main objective of this realistic process is to teach children how the democratic process works, to stress respect for those who have different points of view and, ultimately, acceptance of the results of the process.



Growing and Outgrowing

With our enrollment numbers at maximum capacity, we are reaching as many young minds as possible, and with our pioneering programs, we serve as a model for other schools. The current building is not only very small but also so old that it is virtually impossible to upgrade to allow access to students with disabilities.

Through funding from OPEC, The Arab Fund and Friends and graduates in Dubai, the structural skeleton of a new handicap-accessible kindergarten building has been completed, but it remains totally unusable as funding to finish it has not yet been secured. We hope that through the generosity of our donors, we will be able to complete this building very soon, which will solve the problems of handicap-accessibility and overcrowding, and will also offer the necessary space for teacher training, ensuring that our kindergarten program will continue to serve the needs of the community for years to come.



Top: Voting for king of the jungle; above: Smiles (and a few frowns) after the results of the election are announced.

Professional Training for Lower School Teachers

By Diana Abdel Nour, Lower School Principal

Ramallah Friends Schools strive to offer teachers professional training in order to keep them updated with the latest teaching methods. The lower school has been engaged with the AMIDEAST Model Schools Network (MSN) training program for teachers and administrators since the beginning of the 2008-09 school year. The lower school is one of 20 schools participating from different cities of the West Bank.

The program, which is carried out in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education of the Palestinian National Authority, seeks to introduce a student-centered, contemporary approach to teaching and learning within a network of a minimum of 20 schools in the West Bank. This network serves as the foundation for replicating lessons learned and best practices at other Palestinian schools.

At its core, the MSN Program focuses on four types of initiatives: professional development, physical capacity building, professional networking and student and community integration. Physical capacity building includes computer and science lab upgrades, and a Small Grants Program which provides an opportunity for member-schools to apply for funds for other improvements. Schools involved in the program actively work with parent-teacher associations and engage in an after-school Youth Enrichment Program, where students enjoy summer English, math and science camps. The combination of these four initiatives ensures that educational practices are constantly evolving and improving, which will create the optimal learning environment for our students.



FGS lower school teachers attend AMIDEAST training session.

Lower School News in Brief

FGS Choir Performs

On March 26, the FGS choir was invited to sing at a conference held by the Water Authority on the occasion of Water Day. Our students sang three songs accompanied by dancing. The audience was delighted by their wonderful performance. Water Day is an important day in this area of the world where conservation and distribution of water are critical.

Assessment Training

One of the school's main objectives for this year has been assessment. During the first semester, teachers' workshops were conducted that focused on concepts, objectives, tools and mechanisms of assessing students. A major part of the training focused on preparing well balanced tests that measure understanding and promote critical thinking and analysis. In the second semester, the same trainers met with each participating teacher individually to follow up on the implementation of the training. Our teachers have found this training to be valuable, as well as very beneficial to our students.

Dental Awareness

The school continued enforcing healthy habits and raising health awareness by emphasizing the importance of healthy foods and eliminating junk food. Dental awareness was also taken into consideration. During March, all the students of the school had their teeth checked by a team of five dentists, and a report was prepared for each student to take home to their parents. Prior to the dental examination, students sat with dentists to learn proper techniques for caring for their teeth.

Preparations for Open Day

Open Day has traditionally been a highlight of our school year. It is one of the major events in which the entire school community participates. Preparations are in place for our Open Day that will take place on May 8. We will host sports, music, a science fair and an art fair. All students will participate in these events and our special needs students are no exception.

Demand on Enrollment for 2009-10

The school started receiving applications early in March and, just like last year, the number of applicants has far exceeded the number of vacancies we have. This causes a tremendous pressure on the administration to accommodate every family who wants their child to be admitted. The process of selecting students is very stressful, but once done we can take pride in the high demand for our school.



Above: Kindergarteners picking olives as part of their Environmental Awareness project



Above: An outdoor science class



Above: Fifth graders in technology class

Upper School News in Brief

It's a Small World after All

Sabrin Tamimi's Social Studies class recreated the world's neighbors...literally! Student groups worked together to present authentic replicas of different geographic and ethnic populations, including food, dwellings, native flora and fauna, customs and culture. The entire gymnasium was transformed into a showcase of nations in which spectators could "travel" and be educated by the students ("natives"). From the Savannah of Africa to the snows of the Arctic Circle, the students' presentations were thorough, educational and impressive! Music, dancing, food and drink and even live animals were part of these presentations, offering spectators a realistic glimpse into life in different regions of the world.

Serving and Learning

As a Quaker school, service remains a central theme of our curriculum. All of our students participate in a number of community service projects. Creativity, Action and Service (CAS) is also a requirement of the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. Each IB student is required to complete 150 hours of this program, which is directed by Mohammad Saleem, upper school math teacher. Students are expected to keep a CAS diary and record each activity. Some programs students participated in this year include picking olives during harvest season, planting trees and flower beds, visiting retirement homes and providing gifts and entertainment for people with severe disabilities. The CAS program is now in its ninth year. Based upon the success of the program with 11-12 grade students, we have decided to extend the opportunity to 7-10 graders as well.

Ancestry Comes Alive in English Language Classroom

Seventh grade students were given the opportunity to create oral and written presentations on their family's ancestry. Research included conducting interviews with relatives, visiting their ancestral villages, as well as collecting data through printed resources. Students created movie-like oral presentations that were attended by their families. Samah Hussein, English Language teacher and creator of this important project, summed up its success: "[Students discovered] that ancestors were not names to enter into a database, but they were the heart of our spirit, and the heritage of our smile."



Students really got into the spirit of the project with traditional clothing and food.



Above: Olive pickers rest in the olive grove after a long day's work; right: students clearing to plant trees and flower beds

Larger Classrooms and Improved Education: Thank you, USAID/ASHA!

By Mahmoud Amra, Upper School Principal

Once again, the upper school is adding another building to its campus through a generous grant from USAID's American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA) agency. Over the last 15 years, ASHA has donated grants for the science building, the multipurpose building, the renovation of old buildings and now the new classroom building and upgrades of the landscaping and electricity. ASHA grants make it possible for the school to accept more students and add facilities that improve the quality of education.



*New classroom building
is nearing completion*

Construction started on the new classroom building last summer and is expected to be complete August 2009. The building will have 11 classrooms that are twice as large as some of the old classrooms, and a large student lounge. The new classroom building will allow the school to move gradually from the system in which students stay in the same classroom and teachers move, to a system in which each teacher will have his/her own classroom and students will move. This new system will allow every teacher to design his/her classroom in a way that best serves the subject taught, and teaching methods can become more student-centered. The classrooms will also be equipped with internet connection, an LCD projector and computer.

When the school thought of introducing the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program 15 years ago, one of the main conditions was the upgrading of the science laboratories and the library. ASHA agreed to grant the required funds to build the science building with three fully equipped laboratories and later the multipurpose building that includes a spacious library with thousands of resources. It was only after these substantial upgrades were completed that the IB organization agreed to accredit the school as an IB diploma school.

The school has recently applied to implement the IB program for the middle years (grades 7-10). This new building will certainly facilitate the accreditation of the school as an IB middle years program school, which will allow our students even more opportunities in their educational pursuits.

Model UN Offers Students a Chance to Learn and Teach

By Taher Shaka'a, RFS Sophomore and Chair of the MUN Club

Ramallah Friends Schools has been known since 1869 as a great institution, not only because it takes an extraordinary approach to education but also because it increases students' self-esteem and teaches them the skills they need to succeed in their communities after they graduate. One of the ways it does this is through its Model United Nations (MUN) program.

MUN is a simulation of the actual United Nations where students act like delegates and learn about diplomacy, UN procedure and current events. Participants research a country, take on roles as diplomats, investigate international issues, debate, deliberate, consult and develop solutions to world problems. Our school took 24 students from three grades on three MUN trips this year. We traveled to Amman, Jordan; Istanbul, Turkey; and Doha, Qatar.



These experiences changed us. Our skills in public speaking increased dramatically. Now we can speak freely and express our opinions in front of large groups of people. We learned how to listen to people and understand their opinions and to convince them of ours in the most respectful and diplomatic way. We learned a lot about the United Nations and how it works. Also, we increased our knowledge about numerous world issues and heard different perspectives about them. We became friends with people from different cultures and learned more about their countries and their countries' problems. These trips helped us understand life better:

On these trips we discovered that Palestine, in other people's eyes, is completely different from what it is in reality. They were amazed to find out we had schools, homes and that

we could speak English. We changed the views of people around the world about us and about Palestine. We educated people about our lives under occupation and the realities we live, rather than what they see on T.V.

Finally, we were amazed at other students' skills in the conferences. This inspired us to build up our MUN club like many other international schools. This club will organize a summer program for students from our school who are interested in going to next year's conferences. We will educate them in MUN procedure and give them a more detailed description of MUN so they can be better delegates. Our club has started a fundraising campaign so more students can go to more conferences next year. If you would like to support us, don't hesitate to contact the school or me personally. I would love to tell you more about our MUN club!

Left: *Mayse Jarbawi, RFS junior, votes on a resolution;*
below: *Juman Nijim, RFS senior, confers with other delegates.*



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



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*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 Rebecca Mason in the Director's Office at rmason@palfriends.org or Tel: 011-972-2-2952286, www.palfriends.org



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