

Building Community to Combat Marginalization: Empowering Children with Disabilities.

Palestine

Whitman College

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This Project for Peace came to fruition because of the perseverance of the Palestinian teachers, organizers, and students who are dedicated to strengthening education within their communities. I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to support their steadfastness.

After working with the Hebron International Resource Network (HIRN) in 2019, I was deeply inspired by the organization's emphasis on transforming the everyday lives of the most marginalized sectors of the Palestinian population in the West Bank. I have been fortunate to develop a partnership with a host association that balances everyone's needs and maintains the safety of all as a top priority.

The idea for this project emerged through a collaborative process between the director of HIRN, the centers with which we engaged, and me. Our intention was to support the integration and empowerment of children with disabilities in the West Bank, who face multiple layers of oppression. They live under the repression of the Israeli occupation and are furthermore constrained by social marginalization and a lack of structural support within their greater communities. We hoped to combat these struggles through our projects designed to promote education and strengthen community. Our intention was to create a sustainable exchange between two community-founded centers: the Noor Rehabilitation Center in the Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem, and the My Dream School for children with autism, in the southern city of Yatta. Through our investment in the structural and institutional advancement of these centers and the integration of their students into the greater community, we hoped to bring the centers together to create a lasting infrastructure of support.

This project faced its first challenge as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we were originally scheduled to begin in June 2021, I was unable to travel to Palestine until January 2022. Despite the 6-month postponement, when I finally arrived in Palestine, I found that the needs of the centers remained the same, and we hit the ground running. It was remarkable to witness how, despite the pandemic, both centers had increased the number of children they were able to reach.

Within the first week of my arrival in Palestine, we met with the My Dream Center for children with autism where we were given a tour of the facilities, completed an updated needs assessment, and ordered the materials for construction of the additional Montessori room. With regards to the Noor Rehabilitation Center, however, we faced unforeseen roadblocks in our attempts to build a shelter for the outdoor space, and thus the director of the center asked if we could modify our project slightly to best support the

needs of the children at the time. We decided the best option would be to redirect the funds towards renovating the center's kitchen; the kitchen is used as a space where cooking classes are offered to tourists as a means of creating a sustainable source of income for the teachers. This modification did not significantly alter the required funds and remained consistent with the intention of the grant.

With the exception of this significant change, we were able to accomplish everything we had originally outlined, and more. We completed the construction of the Montessori room and the kitchen by March 1<sup>st</sup>, just in time to inaugurate the building projects and get started on the second phase. The duration of my time in Palestine coincided with two significant events, which we decided to incorporate into our planning: the annual Palestine Freedom of Movement Marathon in Bethlehem, on March 18<sup>th</sup>, and World Autism Awareness Day, on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. These two days are integral to the celebration of the identities of our students, and thus, we culminated our efforts around these events. We enrolled forty participants from both centers in the 5K event at the Marathon, and we bussed 100 students from these two centers and one more to a packed Fun Day to commemorate World Autism Awareness Day.

When local community organizations heard news of our work with these centers, they reached out to offer their support, and we launched a mutual-aid fundraising campaign as well, to spread the word about the upcoming Fun Day. With the help from our community partners and our own fundraising efforts, we were able to raise an additional \$5,000. We decided these funds would be best channeled into a long-term investment in the arts and cultural education for our students. Art and heritage preservation aligns with our goals of cultivating confidence, empowering self-expression, and fostering meaning and belonging for our youth. Thus, we began offering music education for the children at My Dream, and cooking classes for the students at the Noor Society. Through these projects, designed to promote freedom of expression and uplift Palestinian culture, we were able to bear witness to the immense joy and celebration of our students.

It was truly a gift to be a part of this journey, and to discover how, despite social marginalization, political oppression, and a global public health crisis, these centers have remained strong, united, and dedicated to their mission. The best advice I can give to future Projects for Peace participants is to celebrate the strengths of the community you are in. I strongly believe that the success of my project occurred because we remained committed to a community-led, flexible, and strengths-based model. While the scope and nature of the project changed throughout the process, we were clear and unwavering with regards to our intention, and thus, we were able to create many incredible partnerships and enjoy the many successes of our students. This work has transformed how I define peace, because it demonstrated clearly and effectively that while peace on a large scale may seem unattainable, daily peace-building efforts make a huge difference in the lives of individuals. Peace is built, brick by brick, through the everyday, people-led struggle towards justice, and the celebration of community, knowledge, culture and joy.

Personal Statement:

Amara Killen is a bilingual educator and human rights advocate who is dedicated to the global struggle for equitable and just peace. She is incredibly grateful for the opportunity to participate in grassroots community-building in Palestine and is motivated by the local leaders she worked with who were steadfast in their perseverance to uplift community. If you build it, they will come.

Amara Killen





