Building Community to Combat Marginalization: Empowering Children with Disabilities
Amara Killen / Whitman College
The Village of Yatta and the Aida Refugee Camp, Palestine / June 30th-August 30th

Project Objective
Facilitate the education and empowerment of children with disabilities in Palestine by building a community of exchange and support between the Noor Rehabilitation Center and the My Dream School for Children with Autism (photos 1 and 2).

Background
The Hebron International Resources Network (HIRN) is a grassroots organization based in Hebron, Palestine, with a mission to provide support for the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of the Palestinian population in the southern areas of the West Bank. In 2019 I was incredibly fortunate to work with HIRN: I witnessed and documented their human rights efforts and wrote grants to help finance their projects. In recent years, HIRN has partnered with the two centers mentioned above to provide services to Palestinians with disabilities.

The Noor Rehabilitation Center is located in Aida Refugee Camp in the city of Bethlehem. The center offers support programs for children with disabilities in the local refugee camps. Noor was founded by Islam, the mother of a child with special needs, who took it upon herself to open a support center in her home after being unable to find care services through the local government. After a three-year battle with the Aida Refugee Camp administration, during which Islam advocated tirelessly for the expansion of her center, she was finally able to build what is now Noor. The center is currently providing services to over 40 children and is truly a safe haven for many people with disabilities. I visited Noor in 2019 and met Islam, who shared her dreams for the center with me - many of which, due to lack of funding, remain unrealized today.

The My Dream School was created in August of 2020 to support children with autism and Down syndrome in the South Hebron Hills. The director, Saddam, is physically disabled, and his own experiences with marginalization have largely motivated his efforts to open this school. Since the school’s inception, HIRN has worked with Saddam to construct the facility, build a playground, provide specialized games and resources, and service a bus to transport children from across the region. The My Dream School now supports 30 kids and is the only institution providing specialized services for people with autism in the Hebron Municipality (photo 3).

Significance
Both the Noor Rehabilitation Center and the My Dream School have been incredible successes thus far as a result of the perseverance of their directors. Despite this dedication, the centers face constant difficulties in reaching those who seek their services. Due to the occupation under which Palestinians live, there is minimal access in the region to transportation and education for children with special needs. Administrative issues in the Palestinian Authority also prevent necessary social services from reaching vulnerable sectors of the population. These heavy burdens place undue financial stressors on many families and restrict access to their most basic needs. The survival of these centers is of utmost importance to the families who receive care for their children.

Project Description, Methodology and Time of Completion
My project is inspired by the passion and commitment of the grassroots social justice champions who run HIRN, the Noor Rehabilitation Center, and the My Dream School. The project is multipronged, including both the addition of physical structures and a program of exchange between the two institutions.
First, the project will supply the funds for the construction of an outdoor shelter around the Noor facility, which will offer protection for the children from rain and the accumulation of trash on the wheelchair accessible entranceway (photo 4). Second, the fellowship will support the addition of an extra Montessori room at the My Dream School to meet its rapidly growing demands. I will be actively involved in securing resources and assisting with hands-on construction for both the shelter and Montessori room.

In addition to these material projects, I will work with both Noor and My Dream to organize field trips for the students of each center to visit each other. These trips will help build ties between the two organizations and will focus on integrating the children into society to reduce their marginalization. The first Fun Day will take place in a park near the Noor Rehabilitation Center, and we will welcome other youth groups from Aida Refugee Camp to join in on the activities. The second Fun Day will take place at the My Dream Center, and we will bring a horse for the children to interact with - an activity that has previously proven successful at the center in reducing anxiety and increasing self-esteem among the children.

This project will occur during July and August 2021. In the first week, I will visit each center to meet the children and form an updated plan for completion of the project. During the month of July, I will strengthen my relationship with the children at both centers and work with Islam and Saddam to fulfill their individual requests. During the month of August, we will implement the Fun Days and plan for future collaboration between the two centers.

**Expected Outcomes and Prospects for Future Impact**
This project aims to address the most immediate needs of the centers, and to form a network to strengthen their individual efforts. The political and institutional challenges the centers face have prevented them from working together, and the ultimate goal of this project is to create a foundation from which they can build on in the future. Its expected outcomes are:

- To construct a sturdy shelter around the Noor Rehabilitation Center to increase wheelchair accessibility and create a safe space for the children to move freely outside.
- To add an additional learning room to the My Dream Center to assist its expansion.
- To organize at least two Fun Days to foster the empowerment and integration of children with special needs.
- To develop a relationship of support between the center directors and staff.
- To assess the future needs of the centers and ensure the continuation of their successes.

**Safety**
The safety of all project participants will be of top priority during the duration of my time in the West Bank. Both centers are located a safe distance from common conflict zones, and I will limit my movement to secure areas at all times during my stay. Additionally, I will be in regular contact with my extended family who live near Jerusalem, and I will stay with them should the need arise.

**Biography and Qualification of Participant**
Amara Killen is a Senior Race and Ethnicity Major at Whitman College set to graduate in May 2021. Her dedication towards social justice has led her to pursue work in immigration reform, domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy, and elementary school education. She traveled to the West Bank in 2019, where she interned with HIRN and worked as a live-in caretaker for a Palestinian woman with physical disabilities in the Al-Azza refugee camp in Bethlehem. Both her work in Palestine and her formal education have motivated her to reflect on her role as a white American Jew who is passionate about fostering human rights and just peace for Palestinians and Israelis alike. By summer 2021 she will have completed one year of formal and spoken Arabic courses and will continue her conversational Arabic studies during her Projects for Peace Fellowship in Hebron.