I. Section One

Project Goals: We aim to provide a pathway for a peaceful, future Palestinian state by undertaking educational initiatives and civic engagement projects in an atmosphere of robust cultural exchange and dialogue. We work closely with all of Mas’ha, but specifically the youth, in order to develop long-term infrastructure that can be utilized to support our three pillars of education, engagement, and exchange independently of BPYI participants, so that the pathway being built for the future lies not in the hands of BPYI participants but in those of the youth of Mas’ha.

Fundraising Efforts: Other The Spring Tea Fundraiser was a 3 hour event on April 28th 2013. Several Bard students volunteered to play music or recite poetry, while attendees either took part in a silent art auction or ate homemade Palestinian cuisine. There was a diverse mix of students, professors and local residents who all contributed in various ways to support BPYI.

This year we lived and worked with Palestinian youth from Mas’ha and engaged in cultural dialogue and exchange that was at times difficult and incredibly challenging, but successful and beneficial. We worked cooperatively to run English classes, to clean up the village graveyard, and to ensure the long-term sustainability of previous projects such as the playground we built in 2011 and the Youth Center we began work on in 2012. This was BPYI’s fifth year and although we have no single achievement like the previous year’s Youth Center and Playground we were able to guarantee a strong, growing future for the Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative.

Contrary to the pristine condition of the Children’s Library, we returned to Mas’ha to find the Playground in disarray from overuse and infrequent maintenance; however, after cleaning and repairing the playground in cooperation with our participants from Mas’ha we undertook steps to ensure that the Playground continues to be a sustainable part of Mas’ha. We did this by installing a light-fence around the playground, as well as hiring an on the ground coordinator and organizer who is a prominent member of the Mas’ha community to work with BPYI while we are not physically there. We also took the opportunity to clear the area above the Playground and install park benches for families to use while they watch their children play on the Playground.

It is always hard to quantitatively evaluate how much impact you’ve had on a community, but this year with BPYI we worked hard to make positive improvements to Mas’ha that could be utilized the whole year round. Bard Senior, Harrison Liddle, found that nothing has inspired him as greatly as talking to the incredibly young but incredibly serious and motivated Murabet Sarsour, the younger brother of the founder of BPYI Mujahid Sarsour. He is looking forward to returning next year to Mas’ha in order to see all the great things that have been done with the Youth Center, as well as show off how much his Arabic has improved after another year of study at Bard. We expect that Murabet and other
Palestinian participants will show up next year speaking English as well as Harrison and filled with ideas waiting to be put into action.

BPYI like the Youth Center we built a year ago is a growing project that is never fully complete. The Youth Center was an amazing accomplishment from years before, but this year we were able to make simple but necessary improvements to it that will make it not only just a resource for the BPYI and the Mas’ha Sports Club to use but also a vital public space available for use by the Mas’ha Women’s Club, the Village Council, and the Red Crescent. The projector we installed will be used for educational classes on topics like first aid and agricultural sustainability, as well as film screenings for recreation or education. The new entranceway we built will ensure the Youth Center can be accessed by women, children, and the elderly. We provided the children’s library with new books, we installed tiles at the girls school-- where public ceremonies like graduations are held-- and donated money towards the Women’s Club to be used to facilitate a Leadership and Empowerment Workshop in the Youth Center.

II. Section Two

We define peace as a continual process of sustained dialogue and engagement. Peace for me us is not a state without disagreements or disputes but a state where violence and anger are not the primary ways of dealing with these inevitable difficulties. Instead, peace can only exist when young people are provided with educational opportunities and pathways for growth and development. Without these pathways and opportunities there is no guarantee of peace and stability.

Our project contributes to peace by not only reassuring the youth of Mas’ha and the rest of Palestine that there are those in the world who recognize their need, who believe that the stories they have to tell us when we come visit are worth hearing and worth bringing back to our communities, but also by giving the village and youth of Mas’ha the tools and encouragement to build their own strong civil society that represents the interests of all the Palestinian people. In the short term our project creates a ground from which peaceful, positive action can arise. The youth center keeps kids from hanging out in the streets and instead teaches them to be community leaders and actors. The playground provides a stress-free public space for children and families; while the new projector and on the ground coordinator will enable rigorous public dialogue and educational programs to be carried out year-round. We believe that the future is bright for Mas’ha and that the brighter the future for Mas’ha the brighter the future for a Palestinian state.

My involvement with this project has completely changed the way I think about the world. We all read news headlines and watch special reports, and sometimes feel overwhelmed by the negativity and harshness of what is being reported. But BPYI has shown me that no matter how depressing we may find the world when we look at it from afar, when you look closer and get to know the actual people that these headlines claim to represent, that you will find vibrant, incredible people living under conditions that those of us in the United States find unimaginable. That despite these circumstances they are filled with more hope and optimism than most people I know, than I was. This has inspired me personally to try and match their hope and optimism. This is a challenge I face every day with the people I met in Mas’ha in mind.

“Living in Mas’ha before and after the BPYI has convinced me of the importance of the project. In the past many people did not believe that peace was an achievable goal under our difficult living conditions, but after seeing so many international students and participants come to Mas’ha and help the village, people now are more optimistic about what they can do to make their lives better. They see that by investing in their youth they can cause change and improvement by their own initiative.” -- Ameer Shalabi