

El-Iman Students Make Pinwheels for Peace for KG in Palestine

Written by Administrator
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On September 19, 2008, El Iman Learning Center held its annual Ramadan Family Iftar and Fundraiser, at NOVA Annandale featuring as the Keynote Speaker Sr. Asmaa Jerusha Lampzey and Sheikh Rashid Lampzey as fundraiser.

Before this wonderful couple took the stage, the audience was addressed by a special Guest Speaker from Al Aqabah, a small Palestinian village, Mayor Haj Sadek. Education for Life and the students of El Iman Learning Center came to know about Mayor Haj Sadek and the plight of his village of Al Aqabah through a Washington based social activist Sr Laurie Jaghlit.

When Sr. Laurie first approached El-Iman with the idea of having the students participate in the "Pinwheels for Peace" project, they jumped at the opportunity. "We had been looking for opportunities for our students to become involved in civic activities and this seemed to be a cause that would appeal to our young students," said Sr. Mary El-Khatib, a founding member of the Board of Trustees and teacher at the school. "The goal was clear and simple- we needed to save a school, a kindergarten, from demolition."

The children wanted to know, "Why is it under orders to be demolished?" This school in the small village of Al-Aqaba in the occupied territories of Palestine had just recently undergone a complete renovation with the help of the international non-profit organization, "The Re-Building Alliance." A new roof and a second floor soon to be the new home of the 'Ibn Rushd" library of science had just been completed. It just didn't make sense to tear it down. What was the problem?

The reason is simple. This school, along with the entire village, is located on land the Israeli army wants to use to conduct combat training. It has the same terrain as South Lebanon and so the military wants to use the land to prepare troops for combat in South Lebanon.

This is not a new military installation. As a young boy of 16 the now current mayor of Al-Aqabah, Haj Sami Sadek, was playing outside one day when he was hit by three bullets from the military

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training exercises from the army camp that had moved in next to his village. He was not alone. Over the years, 40 other villagers were hit by stray bullets, 8 had died from injuries. Training exercises often involved entering the homes of the civilian villagers in the middle of the night. Haj Sami, was paralyzed by the injuries he sustained, however, he did not react in anger, bitterness or self-pity. Most importantly he did not leave his village as many who had been intimidated by these techniques had done.

Instead he grew up and became the mayor of the small village. His goal was to find a way to have the military installations moved from such close proximity to his village.

On the other side of the globe a promising engineer, Donna Baranksi-Walker had foregone a lucrative career in corporate America. She decided to use her engineering abilities to re-build homes, schools or entire villages that had been destroyed by war and other acts of violence. With the support of Donna and the Re-Building Alliance, Haj Sami took his case to the Israeli High Court. To demonstrate their support, villagers came from miles around participate in the world wide, "Pinwheels for Peace" project. Children made pinwheels and wrote their thoughts and messages of peace and hope on them. Even though they were unable to be present at their hearing, their messages and signs did make it. The Israeli High Court ruled in favor of the village. The military installation would have to move.

Unfortunately, the victory was short-lived. Soon after, the village received demolition orders. The school, the masjid, the medical center and all but two of the houses in the village were ordered to be demolished. The reason given was that they had not filed the proper site plans.

Haj Sami refused to give up. With the help of Allah, an Israeli architect and peace activist, Shmuel Groag, volunteered to draw up the necessary site plans for the village. Now it would be only necessary to have the High Court accept the plans. Haj Sami decided to make a visit to the US Congress and the United Nations to tell his story and garner support for his village.

When Sr. Laurie arrived at the school bearing large posters with pictures of al-Aqabah school, Haj Sami and the children in the village making pinwheels, the classrooms were silent. The students listened intently and were captivated by the story. Teachers cried. Laurie explained. "We want you to let Congress know that kids here care." So the children made pinwheels. They wrote words that reminded them of peace, like, "home," "school," "love," and "family." One third grader wrote, "Peace be upon you government of Israel" and on the back, "No justice, no peace." She had just finished reading the story of Rachel Corrie's brave struggle for peace and

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justice.

They collected the pinwheels in a box and sent them to Sr.Laurie. A video was made showing the children making the pinwheels.* Sr. Laurie invited the El-Iman students to accompany her when she took the pinwheels to congress. She told them that Mayor Haj Sami Sadeq wanted to visit the school when he came to the Washington, DC area. The people of the village had seen the video and had taken hope.

Unfortunately, the mayor did not obtain permission to come that year. But he kept trying and finally in September of 2008 he arrived in the Washington, DC area. El-Iman students made the trip to Congress, met with a senior staffer from Senator Jim Webb's office along with the mayor, the principal of Al-Aqabah school and other peace activists from around the country and world.

Haj Sami and company are in New York now meeting with UN officials to plead their case with them. We pray that Allah (Subhanahu wa ta'ala) grant them success. No matter what the outcome, they know that they have done their part in seeking a peaceful resolution to this conflict. By participating in this effort, our students have learned a valuable lesson about their role in government and their duty to stand up for the rights of oppressed people everywhere, and the importance of pursuing peaceful resolutions to conflicts, insha'Allah.

The Pinwheels for Peace video can be seen at www.eliman.org . (Click on "Activities.")

The writer is affiliated with El-Iman Learning Center.