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March 2023



LAJEE CENTER CELEBRATES NEW LEADERS REPRESENTING CONTINUITY AND GROWTH

Lajee Center and 1for3 are proud to introduce a new generation of leaders working across our departments. These women represent both the fruition of long-term nurturing of Lajee staff as well as the excitement of new voices and faces. Aya Darwish has been a community health worker since 2019 and is now the coordinator of the Health Unit. Rania Isaac is the new financial and project coordinator at Lajee. Magi Fatouleh started as the new director of the Zahrat Al-Yasmeen preschool at the start of this academic year, having taught in the school since its inception in 2021. Athal Al-Azza is a longtime board member at Lajee and an occupational therapist who is playing a transformative role in the ACLÁ Palestine gym at Lajee. Her work has great synergies with the health unit. Said Lajee Center director Mohammad Al-Azza, "It is great to see the energy, dedication, and skills Aya, Rania, Magi, and Athal bring to their work each day. I'm so proud to be their colleague."



Aya Darwish, right, with two community health workers at a 2023 Open Day for Health.

Aya Darwish, who was born and raised in Aida Refugee Camp and whose family comes from the village of Malha, began working at Lajee Center in May 2019 as a community health worker, having worked in a medical laboratory previously. Last year she became the coordinator of the health unit. She cites as one of her most important accomplishments the "building of deep trust with the patients" and the ability to improve the health of patients in ways that concretely improve their lives. She is proud that their team reminds patients of the importance of taking care of themselves—a challenge every day due to the violence of the occupation and pressures faced in caring for others while

facing economic and environmental threats. It is a longstanding goal of 1for3 to not only grow programs that serve communities and employ people so they may support their families, but also to develop new skills in staff. Said 1for3.org director Nidal Al-Azraq, "One of the strong elements of our work is that we invest in young people and equip them with as many skills and as much practice as possible so that they can take the lead and become who they are now, leaders of programs. Aya Darwish is one of these young people."

Rania Isaac is a new staff person to Lajee, coming from the neighboring city of Beit Jala. She is a financial and project coordinator. She writes proposals and is coordinating staff training initiatives being led by Gina Abudi of the Abudi Consulting Group. Isaac is writing proposals to renew programs at Lajee that will serve women. She spoke of her commitment to serving her society through her work at Lajee. She expressed pride that Lajee supports women, those with chronic illnesses, and children, including the young children at the preschool. She also talked about the challenges of work at Lajee: "Lajee is close to the checkpoint, and it frequently faces army attacks. Sometimes this means we have to halt our activities temporarily. But these attacks only redouble my commitment to our work." She seeks to ease the isolation residents of the camp can experience.



Magi Fatouleh, center, in a teachers' training for 1for3's Zahrat Al-Yasmeen kindergarten at Lajee Center.



Magi Fatouleh preparing za'tar with students from the kindergarten.

Magi Fatouleh is also a lifelong resident of Beit Jala. As the director of the Zahrat Al-Yasmeen kindergarten who brings years of experience in early childhood education to her work, Magi has big plans. She and the other teachers are planning a Mother's Day party later in March to honors mothers of the students in the class. They are also working on an exhibit of children's learning about the water cycle, a wonderful project as Palestine is on the cusp of spring and enjoying both rain and a season of planting. Children have a health curriculum that includes receiving lessons on dental care as well as an eye test within the school. Teachers are also receiving training from 1for3 leaders in Boston like Katherine Hanna. Moreover, Magi is proud that the

preschool serves children with special needs. One student with Down Syndrome has been able to enroll in a school where she will be integrated into class with many other students. She reflected, "We have painted smiles on the faces of the children and families and brought them hope." She reflects that she is proud of how merely

doing their work in the context of the intense presence of the occupation sends a powerful message. “Our children deserve love and joy,” she affirmed.

Commented Mohammad Al-Azza, "We are happy to have a number of staff members who are from Beit Jala, which has been an important neighboring community to generations of refugees in Aida. We are committed to supporting refugees in Aida and beyond, and we are committed to building a Palestinian society that rejects isolation and celebrates diversity."



Athal Al-Azza, right, with women in training at the ACLAI Palestine gym located in Lajee Center.

Finally, Athal Al-Azza is the trainer at the ACLAI Palestine gym located in Lajee Center. As an experienced occupational therapist and an avid personal trainer, she designs courses for women and patients in the community health program. For some of the patients, Athal has designed special programs to help them recover from major health crises. She has organized a group for people with disabilities to be in regular training in the gym. As she says, “Being a coach in ACLAI فلسطين gives me the chance to be able to heal the people and to be able to contact with my community with much fun and with joy. Thinking about sport as a way to build the next part of our lives, to be healthy and to be able to serve ourselves for the rest of our lives, gives

us power to continue and to give more.” Athal, who is from Beit Jibreen village but who was born and grew up as a refugee in Aida Camp, knows the importance of community healing all too well as she has seen the toll Israeli military incursions have taken over many years.

These young women are not only a crucial part of the future of Lajee Center, they are also helping to build a healthier, wiser, and happier future for all of the people of multiple generations who come to Lajee to enjoy the space created there for growing knowledge, strength, and creativity.



A group stretching at the gym.