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ZHRAT AL-YASMEEN KINDERGARTEN CELEBRATES THE OLIVE HARVEST

The Zahrat Al-Yasmeen Kindergarten was constructed new, and it features crisp carpentry, Aida's most modern playground, and freshly planted gardens. But there are entities at Lajee treasured not for their newness but for their age, entities that were strong and growing long before Lajee came to this corner of Aida Refugee Camp, maybe even long before Aida Refugee Camp itself was established on this edge of Bethlehem: a small grove of olive trees. So it is that Lajee's youngest, the students at Zahrat Al-Yasmeen Kindergarten, had a special series of hands-on lessons about one of Palestinians' star foods, the olive.

Adults in Aida Refugee Camp remember the days when landowners hired people from Aida to pick olives from the trees of a grove northwest of the camp. But in 2005, Palestinians lost access to that space to Israel's construction of the apartheid separation wall immediately on the edge of the camp.

A few years later, Lajee Center was taking action to recover some of the only remaining open space accessible to the camp by relocating into underused garages. What had been a trash dumping area with some neglected olive trees—area owned by a Palestinian outside the camp and also located close enough to the separation wall and an Israeli military base that it was often dangerous terrain—was gradually recovered into Lajee's soccer field, gardens, and playground. Recalls Lajee's Executive Director Mohammad Al-Azza, "Before there was Lajee where it





was, this area was considered dead. From 2007-2008, Lajee revitalized this whole area, even the street itself, near the military base, and it has encouraged other organizations to come to this street, despite the challenging circumstances.”

Today the garden is a coveted location, and the soccer field is frequently in use, including by teams from beyond Aida. Lajee Center staff and volunteers also have tended the trees, on Palestinian Land Day, during summer work camps, and through annual pruning. As Lajee Center Executive Director Mohammad Al-Azza recalls, “We took a long time to get to where we are now with the olive trees. No one had been taking care of them. We have been tending them for years, and this is why they are now so productive.”



This set the stage for the newest generation of olive harvesters. First the children, aged three to five, learned about fall as a harvest season, and about how their ancestors had been farmers. They learned that olive trees used to provide many families’ main sources of income. Then, over several days, they participated in the harvest. They picked the olives with teachers and Lajee Center employees. Said teacher Dima Ridwan, on that day beneath the branches, “Students learned about collective effort. Working with adults at Lajee nurtured in our students a sense of cooperation.” They also learned more about the trees themselves. Children enjoyed the physical engagement with the olives and the trees alike. They noticed, Dima said, “the different colors that the olives can be.” Commented teacher Manar Sarhan, “The children enjoyed learning about the tools used in the harvest, and they were eager to help,” for example by holding open bags to receive the olives.



Then, explained the teacher Maggie Fatoula, children learned how olives are processed. “First, we soaked the olives in water for two days, and then the children learned how to tap each olive with a rock to prepare it for pickling,” a process called *daqq al-zaytun*. After more soaking of the olives, parents and grandmothers joined to help preserve the olives with lemon, salt, and olive oil. The children then visited a local olive press, proud to wear their kindergarten t-shirts. They were amazed by the conveyor belts and the golden olive oil that emerges at the end of the process. Finally, they made manaqeesh with za’tar, a special Palestinian bread that requires terrific olive oil.

Explained Mohammad, “this curriculum is very important given the role that agriculture has played for Palestinians historically and how many olive trees are being taken out by settlers to try to erase Palestinian history and presence. We are transmitting this experience of olive harvesting from generation to generation. 95% of the children in the kindergarten are from Aida Camp, and no one here has olive trees, because families have no space in the camp. This is an opportunity for them to learn about the olive season from A to Z.”

By doing all of these activities, observed Dima, children learned the different products of the tree and how they are connected. They came to understand where their food comes from. Commented Manar, the harvest offered children a deeply sensory experience as well as an active one.

The picking of the olives was meaningful for the teachers as well. Says Manar, this activity is “essential because olives are integral to our daily lives, and part of Palestinian traditions.” Dima explained, “The olive tree is a blessing and a symbol for us as Palestinians. Plus we depend upon it in so many ways for our daily lives.”

US-based team member Katherine Hanna commented on seeing photos of these events, “These beautiful babies were being hoisted up by their loving teachers to reach the tall branches; they were collecting the fallen olives from the ground, picking out the leaves and debris and having their lunch under the trees with traditional music and singing in much the same way as our ancestors have always done. I was so proud to see the school's role in preserving our cultural heritage and connection to the land for a new generation.”

Maggie concluded that the children’s love of the kindergarten is clear: “You can see it in the smiles on their faces.”

