



1for3 News

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ZAHRAT AL-YASMEEN KINDERGARTEN OPENS!

Zahrat Al-Yasmeen Kindergarten has opened, and now welcomes fifty three, four, and five year olds each day to learn together in those precious years before school is available through the United Nations or the Palestinian Authority. Remarkable Lajee Center director Mohammad Al-Azza, “The opening of the kindergarten came in the shadow of a difficult time due to the COVID crisis. It also a realized dream for those of us who have been at Lajee for many years, especially because this school so distinctive. The camp needs this kind of education to build a new generation.” The kindergarten opened its doors in late August, with construction and operating costs supported through 1for3 and generous grants from the McMillan Stewart Foundation. Families and students alike were astonished by the beautiful space, the thriving gardens, the colorful new playground provided by Playgrounds for Palestine, and many new kinds of equipment and toys.



To prepare for the opening, training oriented four early childhood education teachers in providing a play-based curriculum drawn from the Reggio-Emilia approach, which is student-centered and rooted in plurality. It focuses on collaborative learning. It views the child as a subject with rights, with “a hundred worlds to invent,” as evoked by poet Loris Malaguzzi. Other trainers included renowned Palestinian art therapist Khitam Edelbi and intrepid Palestinian-American and American teachers Katherine Hanna and Beverly Wispelwey. Commented Zahrat Al-Yasmeen teacher Maggie Fatula, “Our system is different from other kindergartens in Palestine because it is about learning by way of play. When I want to teach the

child her colors, I do this through having the child discover and feel each color.”

1for3 Executive Director Nidal Al-Azraq had recently visited the site when the kindergarten opened. He commented, “When I look at this beautiful and meaningful place, I think of our teams in Palestine and here in the U.S. who worked so hard to make sure the kids and their families will enjoy the best facilities and the best education. This is what a true partnership is to me. When international volunteers join with the Palestinian teams on the ground to work and think together, to decide together, they build the ground for the local community to build a better future for themselves. Everything we do goes directly into creating a safe, fun, and loving place where the children can learn.”



The kindergarten has changed the feel of Lajee Center. “It has brought new life to Lajee Center,” remarked Mohammad Al-Azza. “We were always known to be active after school, or in the summer, but the mornings during the school year used to be quiet. Now you hear children’s laughter, their voices as they play in the playground.” It has also strengthened ties between Lajee and the families of the camp. “Parents are more vocal in asking for what they want,” he said. “They seek to be active participants in the education of their children.”

This is also one of the first preschools in Palestine to include and integrate children with special needs into its classes. Commented teacher Maggie Fatula, “Elsewhere in Palestine, children with Down syndrome or autism do not have a way to be integrated into kindergartens.” But here, she emphasized, they are “loved, active participants.” Families and children together learn that “it’s their right to have this place and to take part.”

The team from the United States looked on from afar at the opening. Katherine Hanna reflected, “Seeing the preschool open its doors to the happy children, smiling families, and excited teachers made me feel that this project is much more powerful than we’d ever hoped for. It was and is a true collaboration between the US team and Palestine team, unlike some other projects in Palestine that rely on outside donors, and I’m really so proud to be a part of it. My only regret is that I couldn’t be there to witness the moment because of the pandemic.”



The children benefit from presence at Lajee Center and from proximity to other of 1for3’s and Lajee’s programs. Maggie Fatula emphasized this point: “It is a special kindergarten because of its students and its team, and because it is under the roof of Lajee Center. Lajee provides so much toward the development of the child, from so many angles—dabka, circus play, the library, and the health & environment units. We incorporate these activities into the school.” [Visit 1for3.org](https://www.1for3.org) to learn more and join our fall campaign to support the school!

“DEAR YASMEEN...”

Read Board Member Hubert Murray’s moving [article](#) in the *Places Journal* on his experience as an architect of the Zahrat Al-Yasmeen kindergarten. In it, he reflects on the history of Aida Refugee Camp, moments of inspiration for the kindergarten, its construction, and education and decolonization, also drawing on his own life experiences. (Pictured here: a part of his initial plans drawn for the kindergarten in 2018.)

“Helping a child to name the manifold injustices of Occupation is a way of creating a safe haven. In the Jasmine Flower Kindergarten (*zahrat al-yasmeen*, روضة زهرة الياسمين means “jasmine flower”), the seeds of a new society can grow and flourish.”

