

# A Children's Library in Deir Al-Balah

## The Rebirth of Al Khader Monastery



By Reem Abu Jaber

My father told me once that I am stubborn like a donkey. Isn't that beautiful? I try things my way, sometimes I fail, sometimes I succeed. But in the end, I learn. My name is Reem; I am 44 years old and have lived in the Gaza Strip most of my life. I was born in Deir Al-Balah (Arabic for Monastery of the Palms) in the middle of the Gaza Strip, and currently I am working as the executive director of Nawa Association for Culture and Arts.

In 2014, only a few months after the establishment of Nawa, a group of young people (naming themselves *Deirna Al-Shababi*, Arabic for the Monastery of Our Youth), like many other youth groups in the area engaged in the wonderful initiative to support people's needs after the latest Israeli aggression. They also raised



the idea of restoring *Al-Khader* (Saint George) monastery and agreed with Nawa to the idea of rehabilitating it to house a children's library, the first children's library in town. Nawa took full responsibility towards the management of this initiative, including fundraising, planning, and implementation.

Situated in Deir Al-Balah, the site extends across an area of 200 square meters. Three domes top the monastery that is surrounded by stone walls. The main chapel is located underground and can be reached via a small flight of stairs that leads to an area with three apses and a historic water well that was once used for drinking and baptism. Two ancient Greek inscriptions and a stone tomb have also been found. The building housed a monastery and a mosque, peacefully side by side, for hundreds of years.

But who will fund a new-born NGO? Our dream was big and the resources were very small – in a country that had just survived a major Israeli military attack. People were suffering gravely, and all resources were used to support the families of the wounded and those who had lost their children, homes, and livelihoods.

The Sufi poet Rumi once said, "There is a candle in your heart, ready to be kindled. There is a void in your soul, ready to be filled. You feel it, don't

**Nawa is a non-profit organization founded in 2014 by a group of young, educated, and passionately dedicated Palestinians in order to help empower their local communities through culture and arts programs. Located in Deir Al-Balah, Nawa serves the Palestinian community in Gaza at large.**

you?" Nawa team understood that donors will not consider us as their first destination for support, so we started with ourselves as our main resource: every member of Nawa worked as a volunteer. We opened a special bank account and started promoting our idea among "humans." We conducted a fundraising campaign and were amazed by the response of the people who either live in the area or inside Palestine, and by supportive friends from outside Palestine. Humanity brings us all together. Eventually, we succeeded in collecting around US\$ 50,000 from people all over the world.

At the same time and in parallel, Nawa signed an agreement with the ministry



of tourism to legally support our dream of restoring and rehabilitating the monastery as a children's library. We initiated a contact with the UNESCO Ramallah office, seeking their support for the restoration not only financially but also in terms of technical experience. Things were not easy! Following their aggression on Gaza in 2014, the Israelis prevented construction materials from getting into Gaza – another obstacle. But funded by the Government of Sweden through UNESCO, and implemented by RIWAQ Centre for Architectural Conservation (West Bank), in cooperation with IWAN Centre in the Gaza Strip, restoration works were completed in late December 2016.

Meanwhile, Nawa initiated a partnership with Drosos Foundation to help run the library services for three years (2016-2018). The project focuses on providing quality non-formal educational services (cultural, artistic, environmental, and educational) to children aged 4 to 12 years; it also provides a literacy program for parents, and a community self-help program for children and young people in the Deir Al-Balah area. Nawa secured the library's furniture through a grant from the British Consulate General in Jerusalem, purchased and

technically prepared 4000 suitable and attractive library materials, and locally designed software to run library operations. Despite a delay in finishing the restoration, Nawa started engaging the children through cultural activities in other locations.

Nawa happily opened the library to the public in January 2017. We started by offering different activities for children (on how to use the library, explaining how libraries are built and library collections gathered, how books are organized based on age, and how they can be loaned). Children were introduced to the Dewey decimal classification, and to the use of a book's table of content. Because children love stories and fiction, a special corner was prepared with children's fiction. A storyteller has implemented library-related activities to enhance children's understanding through different activities such as using library instructions cards, and repeating library instructions at opening circles on daily basis. One of the most beautiful activities has been to engage the local community in the beautification of Al-Khader Street. Children were encouraged to use ceramic tiles to write their names and install them on the long corridors. Their participation was inspiring, and the

street corridor is very beautiful now, adorned with children's names, flying books, reading mothers, palm trees, and local flowers.

The library team observed and instructed the children – the library receives about 160 children every day now – over the first two months. After very unruly manners had been exhibited in the beginning, improvement in general behavior, in the treatment and use of books and furniture as well as other children, and in learning has been observed. These changes fill the library team with pride. Most participating children have become quieter, and their commitment to library laws and instructions is obvious. Children handle books more carefully, they sit and move properly inside the library, and they cooperate with other children in using the small place. The environment in the library is calm, more children whisper while communicating, there is much less use of bad words, and children know how to put their shoes into a locker before entering the storytelling corner.

The children's participation in the cleaning of the library (children know where cleaning tools are and how and when to use them) has led to the improvement of their overall attitude

towards cleanliness. Children have initiated cleaning without being asked to do so (improvement has been shown by both girls and boys, as the latter are equally encouraged to take part in cleaning activities). Children 9 to 12 years of age have given great examples of guiding and supporting younger newcomers to the library. As children

**While historical information about Saint George Monastery, locally known as *Maqam Al-Khader* is scarce, the Survey of Western Palestine, carried out by the British Corps of Royal Engineers in 1872, notes that the ancient Greek inscriptions found at the monastery indicate it was built during the late sixth century. The site has long been revered for spiritual and meditation purposes by both Muslims and Christians. Over the centuries, however, it fell into ruins and lost its significance.**





**The numbers of children who are benefiting from the library on daily basis are growing, the positive change in the children's behaviour is obvious and proven, and the number of children reading, borrowing books, attending cultural and arts activities, and participating in community contributions are increasing. Additionally, progress in community awareness sessions and in the commitment of parents, mainly mothers, to participate in and engage with their children's learning is admirable.**

were encouraged to spread the word about the library, they have promoted it among relatives and friends. The library team has saluted the children who brought their friends and published their names on the library bulletin board, which encouraged many other children to do the same. The children now spend more time in front of shelves to select what they want to read, skimming books before deciding whether to

take them to the reading table or not, and they take only what suits their interests. They line up in queues and organize themselves to assure better services for all. Feedback from parents is positive, and they point out not only a keen desire of their children to attend and participate in the activities but also a positive change in their behaviour.

Even though the children's library is the fulfilment of a dream, Nawa' team knows very well that we will not solve all the children's problems with books and related activities. But we are doing our part in working towards a solution. Nawa is the name for the seed of palm trees – as we consider a good education to be the seed of a promising future for all of us.

*Reem Abu Jaber holds a Bachelor's Degree in Library Science, a master's degree in the strategic planning of libraries, and she has more than 15 years of experience in working as a director of children's cultural centers. Reem has furthermore a longstanding experience in providing psychosocial support programs for traumatized children in the Gaza Strip. In 2011, she was awarded the French National Order of Merit in recognition of her work with children. She is currently the executive director of Nawa Association for Culture and Arts in Deir Al-Balah.*

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