

Fall 2011 Newsletter

AMLN and ACCON Proudly Conclude 2011 “My Galilee” Leadership Program

The unprecedented two-week leadership program, coordinated by AMLN and its sister organization, the American Cultural Center of Nazareth (ACCON), partnered Americans with Arabs and encouraged them to explore and deconstruct the stereotypes, prejudices, and social issues facing their respective societies and their relationship to each other. Through a series of dialogue sessions, cultural excursions, and meetings with prominent individuals in politics and society, the Americans and their Arab counterparts came to develop a greater appreciation for each other and the nuances of the challenges facing that particular part of the Middle East.

The program provided the opportunity for the American delegates to stay with the families of their Arab partners, and in doing so a valuable opportunity for both the Arabs and the Americans to build the kind of bonds that can overcome the misconceptions that abound about both their societies. This end was further served by numerous chances to meet prominent individuals, community leaders, clergy, business people and elected officials and engage them about various issues affecting the nature of Arab-American relations. Among the individuals met by the delegates were prominent figures such as Mr. Muhammed Shamiyeh, Senior Assistant to the Director General of the Knesset; Prof. Hossam Haick of the Technion, a native of Nazareth and a trailblazer in the field of non-invasive, diagnostic health technology; Mr. Ramez Jeraisy, the mayor of Nazareth; and Reem Naddaf, one of only a handful of female Arab judges in Israel.

When not in Arabic class, meetings or dialogue sessions, there were many visits to sites of interest, such as the beautiful Baha'i Gardens in Haifa, the summit of Mount Precipice in Nazareth, the souks of the Old City in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the Dead Sea. Through the combination of these excursions and more formal events and meetings, the American and Arab delegates were able to form a connection that is sure to last. It is our hope that this bond will serve as the foundation for future cooperation and understanding between Americans and Arabs.



Message from the President

Though AMLN has been organizing youth leadership exchange programs for a number of years now, words cannot express how content I was with our crop of students this year and the outcome of the program. From among many interested applicants, we selected a wonderful group of Americans and Arabs to participate in an unprecedented program. By bringing together American youth with Arab youth from the Galilee, we were able to bring the Americans' attention to the unique status and challenges of the Arab community in Israel and make the Arab students aware of the many opportunities for advancement, dialogue, and personal development that exist in the United States and elsewhere. As President of the AMLN, I extend my heartfelt thanks to our board members, staff, volunteers, sponsors, donors, the participants and the host families for making the 2011 “My Galilee” Leadership Program a tremendous success. I also extend a special thank-you to Samir Qumsieh and his Nativity Television Station for enabling our visit to Bethlehem, and to United Christian Communities for sponsoring the program.

Sincerely, Rami Nuseir



Program Highlights

Arrival in the Galilee

On July 31st, a contingent of American students and young professionals finally arrived in the Galilee for AMLN's "My Galilee" Leadership Program. Weary from nearly a day of travel, the Americans were introduced to their Arab counterparts at the St. Joseph's School and later fed a wonderful meal by AMLN Executive Director Rami Nuseir's mother at her home in Nazareth. The following day consisted of a tour of Nazareth, which included visits to the White Mosque and two Churches of the Annunciation by way of the Nazarene market. The day concluded with a visit to Mount Precipice, from where Jesus is said to have leapt while escaping an angry mob from the local synagogue. The mountain offered a spectacular view of the Nazarene sunset, and the group concluded its day with a dinner at local restaurant Meshwar.



The Delegates Meet the Mayor

The highlight of our second day in Nazareth was the unique opportunity to speak with Nazareth's mayor, Ramez Jeraisy, about the challenges facing his city and the larger Arab community in Israel. With local media outlets in attendance, the delegates engaged Mayor Jeraisy on a number of topics, from budget discrimination to the preservation of Arab identity.



After taking a brief break, we continued on to Nazareth Village, a reconstructed version of what Nazareth may have looked like during the time of Jesus, and paid a visit to the French Hospital, a unique institution offering valuable health services to Nazareth's citizens. The day ended with a dinner and dialogue with the local branch of the Rotary International Club, whose

members are committed to serving the needs and advancing the interests of the local Arab community.

The District Court and Nazareth University

Our group's visit to the district courthouse offered the unique opportunity to meet with Judge Reem Naddaf, one of only a handful of female Arab judges in Israel. Judge Naddaf graciously answered our questions and shared her understanding of Israeli law, which she sees as theoretically sound but potentially lacking in its application, especially with regard to minority groups. After taking our leave from the judge, we proceeded to the Academic Institute of Nazareth, the first Arab institute of higher learning recognized by Israel. We met with Dr. George Kanazi, the Institute's president, who spoke about the University's mission and the challenges it faces. Dr. Kanazi hopes it will one day achieve mainstream recognition and count both Arab and Jewish students among its ranks. We reunited that evening at the Abu Salma Library for the opening ceremony of the 2011 "My Galilee" Leadership Program, where program participants Stephanie Bisharat and Fernando Villafuerte spoke on behalf of the Arab and American delegates, respectively. The mayor's assistant, Imad Abu Ahmad, and other community leaders also took some time to address the delegates. Local media were in attendance and published photos from the event on their websites. The day finally ended with a wonderful dinner at Sudfeh, where all the participants were finally able to unwind.



The Galilee and the Golan Heights

A tour of the Galilee offered the delegates an escape to the regions north of Nazareth. Many of the sites visited—such as Capernaum, the Church of the Multiplication, and the Church of the Beatitudes—retraced the steps said to have been taken by Jesus during his ministry. Though the weather was hot (reaching 104 degrees Fahrenheit at one point), there were many opportunities to escape the heat in chapels and churches dotted across the landscape. After concluding our tour, the group made its way to Majdal Shams, a Druze village located in the Golan Heights. Local Druze community leader Dr. Maray Taiseer introduced himself to our group and led us on a tour of the village, explaining Druze history and the unique challenges their community faces in light of the occupation.

The Port of Haifa and the Technion

The group's trip to Haifa on the Mediterranean coast was a busy one. The first stop was the Baha'i World Center, where the group was led on a tour of the beautiful, terraced gardens and treated to a video about the Baha'i faith and its adherents. After touring the gardens, our group headed to the Technion, Israel's premier engineering and applied science institute, where we had the privilege of meeting Dr. Hossam Haick, an Arab scientist and native of Nazareth, who is making great strides in non-invasive technology that can detect various diseases well before they develop.



The group also had the privilege of meeting Dr. Josef Hagin, who is researching the treatment and recycling of wastewater for irrigation of crops, crucial in a region as dry as this one. The day's formal program ended with a trip to the Mossawa Center, whose name translates into English as "equality." The organization is concerned primarily with advancing and protecting the rights of Israel's Arab citizens, and its Executive Director, Jafar Farah, offered his ideas about future of Arabs in Israel.

Heart of the Holy Land: Jerusalem and Bethlehem

No visit to The Holy Land would be complete without stops in Jerusalem and the neighboring city of Bethlehem, locations important to scores of people for various reasons. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, the delegates made their way to the Knesset, where they were greeted by Muhammad Shamiyeh, who serves as Senior Assistant to the Director General of the Knesset, making him the highest-ranked, appointed Arab official in the Knesset.



With little time to spare, the group then headed for the Old City of Jerusalem, which the delegates had a few

hours to explore. Some of the American delegates were lucky enough to visit the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa, and the whole group had the chance to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. After reconvening, we met with Bishop William Shomali of the Latin Patriarchate, who spoke of his hope for a Jerusalem open to people of all faiths and backgrounds. Upon concluding our day in Jerusalem, the delegates piled back onto the bus and headed across the barrier into Bethlehem, where they settled into their hotel for the night.



The following day in Bethlehem was filled with a number of engagements coordinated by our partner Samir Qumsieh and his local television station, Nativity Television, the first of which was a meeting with the city's mayor, Dr. Victor Batarseh, who spoke about Bethlehem, the challenges it faces, and its dependence on the tourists/pilgrims who make their way to the various holy sites in the city. Like Bishop Shomali, he too hopes for a united Jerusalem open to Jews and Palestinians alike. Not long after our meeting with the mayor, we visited Bethlehem University, a top-notch institution run by the Christian Brothers. Despite the constant interruptions in the program of study due to the occupation, the university continues to provide a quality education at almost no cost to Palestinian youth, who in turn go on to some of the best graduate programs in the world. With barely a moment to spare, we then went on our way to meet the Grand Mufti of Bethlehem, Sheikh Abdelmajid Al-Amarneh, who emphasized the unity of Christian and Muslim Palestinians in the face of occupation. The final engagement of the day was a meeting with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate spokesperson, Rev. Issa Musleh, who addressed various issues and concerns regarding church administration and decision-making. In a manner unexpected yet weirdly befitting, the group danced the night away with a group of Brazilian pilgrims at a local hotel.



Final Days: Haifa by Night and Iftaar in Ein Mahel

With the end of the program nearing, the youth ambassadors convened to discuss their experiences and document them through a series of taped interviews they conducted with their partners. Once the task at hand was completed, we made our way to Haifa, where we met with the Salma Dance Group, who performed a lively dabkeh number from one of their upcoming performances and invited us to join in! We then concluded the night with a walk on the beach and some of the best shawarma Haifa had to offer.

We celebrated our final night of the program at an iftaar meal a prominent resident of Ein Mahel, an Arab village near Nazareth, invited us to. We enjoyed a delicious meal of roasted lamb, rice, pita and hummus, along with a serving of a dessert popular during Ramadan, Knafeh. Before retiring for the night, we gathered one last time to celebrate the program's end with some cake and festive dabkeh.



The Mission

AMLN recognizes the need for cultural exchange at the grassroots level if relations between the United States and the Arab World are to improve. This is to be achieved, above all, by encouraging youth on both sides of the divide to engage each other honestly and directly in activities, dialogue sessions, and cultural excursions. By developing programs that foster this kind of constructive exchange between American and Arab youth, AMLN hopes to establish the kind of bonds that will facilitate future dialogue and cooperation when these youth become leaders in their respective societies. Furthermore, AMLN believes that sustained, face-to-face interaction is the best way to challenge and overcome the numerous stereotypes and prejudices that color the way Americans and Arabs perceive each other.



The Delegates



Sana Khan



Fernando Villafuerte



Devin Jones



Jameel Brenneman



Fatma Abdeljawad



Cassia King



Narmeen Aboud



Osama Abu Jaber



Khaled Shehadi



Stephanie Bisharat



Ibrahim Nuseir



Lina Kussaim