

Proposal for the Davis Projects for Peace

Description of Project:

The Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative is an entirely student run project, under the umbrella of the Bard College Center for Civic Engagement. Over the past five years we have developed a strong and unprecedented relationship between the College and Mas'ha, a village in the West Bank. Every year, twenty students from Bard travel to Mas'ha during the summer to run educational and civic engagement projects, all in an atmosphere conducive to cultural exchange and dialogue. In undertaking these initiatives and projects we aim to provide a pathway for a peaceful future Palestinian state. The unique relationship that has developed between Bard College and Mas'ha shows that youth from two very different places can live, work, and learn together to make a more peaceful and sustainable future. It teaches all of our participants, American or Palestinian, that we have much more in common with one another than we thought, that our differences do not stop us from working together and developing close bonds, but instead make these bonds and the work we accomplish with one another all the more special and unique.

Each year our trip and the things we accomplish depend on funding from organizations that share our beliefs like the Kathryn W. Davis Projects for Peace. Your support has been absolutely essential to all of our accomplishments. In the past we have established one of the West Banks only Children's Library, built a public Playground, and re-purposed an abandoned building to serve as a Youth Center for the village's deeply established Youth Club. We continue to utilize these projects, as well as constantly re-evaluate what needs to be done to ensure their stability. This year we hope to engage in the following projects:

- **BPYI Planting for Peace: The BPYI Green Initiative:** a cooperative project to transform the entrance of Mas'ha by planting over three hundred trees. This project would not be possible without the support of the community. It is our way of giving back to the entire village for all the support they have given us over the years. These trees we plant this summer will start small and vulnerable, but we will watch them grow and see the future become brighter before our eyes. They symbolize both our long-term commitment to the Mas'ha and our belief in a peaceful future.
- **Trash Management/Waste Disposal:** by collaborating with the Village Council and members of the community we hope to apply creative, efficient solutions to fix the problem of trash on the streets of Mas'ha, which is a result of the absence of a well-equipped and functioning municipality. We plan to set up trash cans around the village as well as hold joint-run educational workshops.
- **Mas'ha Family Park:** over the years we have strived to create new public spaces within the Village based on the needs of its residents. A place for the Youth Club and other organizations like the Women's Council to meet, a fenced Playground to keep little kids off the streets and in a safe, friendly environment, and now a Family Park connected to the Girl's School where women and girls can congregate in private, hold meetings, work on homework, or just drink tea and relax outdoors. This space matters to Mas'ha because of the lack of public spaces designed and intended for use primarily by women.

- Science and Technology Initiative: with the addition of ten new computers to the Youth Center we will foster the development of programs in the fields of Science and Technology in the Village. This past summer we spoke to many students who expressed a desire to pursue careers and education within these fields but were unable to do so because of a lack of resources and encouragement. By creating a Computer Lab in the Youth Center we open the doors for educational programs in these promising fields to be led by both our participants and members from the community. These, of course, are only our new initiatives. We will continue to run our children's summer camp that all of Mas'ha expects, as well as hold sessions with rigorous cultural dialogue and exchange with Palestinian residents. These projects are the foundation of BPYI and serve to spur the development of new projects to address the changing needs of the citizens of Mas'ha. Together with our friends and colleagues from Mas'ha, BPYI will continue to support the positive social change that the people of Mas'ha seek for themselves.

Importance:

Although the Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative is strictly non-political its importance is highlighted by the situation on the ground. Conflict in the region has lasted more than 60 years, the Palestinian people are isolated from the rest of the world by a wall, and the poverty rate is very high. However, political avenues have been largely ineffective. By emphasizing civil engagement, enabling human connections between Palestinians and Americans, and encouraging education, BPYI, as a grassroots project, bypasses the stalled political process, creates an arena for dialogue and facilitates real change on the ground. Furthermore, being the only American student run organization of its type, the Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative is truly unique. BPYI students recognize that the youth we work with today will have many challenges to overcome in the future. BPYI works on the premise that creating a strong sense of agency and belief in the value of civil action and society will help to empower the youth of Mas'ha to face these challenges confidently and capably. We believe that BPYI, at every stage (whether working cooperatively to repurpose a public space, running a summer camp for children, or discussing what marriage means to Americans versus what it means to Palestinians) helps to create dialogue and a future environment of peace, positive change, and stability. This environment extends beyond the borders of the West Bank and the youth we work with there. It is something that our American students bring back with them to Bard College and the rest of their lives. The experience of living and working in the Mas'ha not only demolishes negative stereotypes many of us hold without realizing, but also inspires our students to become informed advocates for peace and social change.

Feasibility:

We have taken steps to ensure the feasibility of the project by working closely with a contact on the ground, year-round in Mas'ha, Naell Amer, who is the head of the Youth Club and manages the Youth Center we built previously. Our list of goals for this summer were not created in isolation in upstate New York but were instead created through back and forth dialogue between BPYI, The Youth Club, the Village Council of Mas'ha, and other members of the community. Thus we feel confident that we can not only achieve our goals but also guarantee that they are worthwhile and indeed beneficial to the community we hope to serve.