

The Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative (BPYI)

Mas'ha, The West Bank, Palestine

Bard College

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www.bpyi.org

Section One:

b. The Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative is the only entirely student-run Palestinian engagement program in the United States and we are founded upon the belief that constructive civil engagement, cultural exchange, and education create an environment conducive to self-expression. Every year, fifteen to twenty Bard College students travel to Mas'ha, a small village in the West Bank where - in partnership with the local community - we run children's summer camps, organize community service projects, teach English classes and engage in cultural discussion and exchange.

c. In addition to the Davis Grant, BPYI received funding from the Violet Jabara Charitable Trust. The Jabara Trust aims to support programs that develop countries in the Middle East through encouraging cultural exchange and education initiatives between specific Middle Eastern countries and the United States. BPYI also receives funding from a variety of smaller scale initiatives such as multiple letter campaigns and presentations of our programs with people and organizations interested in our project.

d. The trip to Mas'ha, The West Bank this summer was a wonderful, exhausting, thoughtful and challenging few weeks. As a group of foreign students, we were constantly working through the logistical puzzles that come with the territory of traveling in the West Bank and working in a small town with limited economic means. We experienced days of extreme heat, challenges with transportation, unexpectedly large amounts of participants in our programs, language barriers and complex gender relations. The circumstances we were in called upon our ability to act with grace, no matter the situation. We were challenged in our spirits, determination, creativity and perseverance. We experience many moments of extreme inspiration when we felt our work was empowering to both the community and to ourselves. On the other hand, we also witnessed the sense of loss that permeates life in the West Bank. After a long day of teaching and running the summer camp, we often discussed, what is it exactly that we are doing here on the West Bank? A poem or a song, we would say, cannot defend people in the face of violence or war. So what are we doing here? Even after much deep contemplation, a satisfactory answer is elusive. We did conclude, however, that poems and songs are the things that inspire and give life. This summer made us all sure of that. Through our poetry, theater and other art making activities with the students in Mas'ha we lost any doubt that art is crucial to existence. We saw life and exuberance and joy blossoming from the creations of students of all ages. To facilitate a time for exploring language and art and creativity is our defense of life. We are creating a small oasis of peace by continuing to engage cross-culturally and sharing the diverse art and thinking that we cherish with each other.

We are now in our eighth year of working with Mas'ha and our ideas, programs and connections are continuing to grow. We have gained not only the trust of Mas'ha residents, but we have become an integral part of their community. They expect us to come every year and we can't wait to visit them. Our engagement this summer consisted of teaching a class called "Language and Thinking" (L & T), teaching English class, holding art lessons, cleaning the streets and running a summer camp. L&T is one of the pillars of a Bard College education, which aims to cultivate habits of thoughtful reading and discussion, clear articulation, accurate self-critique, and productive collaboration. Central to all of this is an examination of the link between thought and expression. This class facilitates an open, honest dialogue, which we believe is particularly important in areas of conflict. Our L & T classes were a major success. We had an unprecedented amount of students coming to our activities and classes. In addition to engaging in Mas'ha, we

also worked with two nearby towns called Zawya and Bidya. We spent the first week in Mas'ha and the second week teaching in Zawya. Students from Bidya traveled to the classes in Masha and Zawya. We made very strong connections in both these places and we will definitely continue working with the students there in the future. In all three locations, we had really challenging and in-depth conversations about the roles we have in our various communities and the impact of the conflict with Israel. Among many other concepts, we explored the idea of freedom. Some questions we considered were: Can you have freedom with limitations? What are the different kinds of freedom? Is freedom something we inherently have or does it have to be given to us? If freedom isn't granted to us by society, can we create a personal freedom in our own lives? As teachers and learners from far away places, we were learning how to work with the immediacy of the occupation in the West Bank. No matter what we discussed in class, the conflict between Palestine and Israel always arose. We often asked ourselves, how can we use the students strong life experiences of concepts like fear, courage, freedom, separation and oppression to deepen their understanding of their experience living here and also expand their thinking to places around the world?

Section Two:

a. The Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative (BPYI) is a testament to the power of determination. Over the years, many cultural circumstances, monetary challenges and political climates have attempted to thwart the project. Yet, we have always found a way to reconnect. Though we work in an area where the political circumstances are central to daily life, we have never defined ourselves a political project. We understand ourselves as a cultural exchange and education project. We frame our program through the lens of sharing and exchanging. Our goal is to form connections, create relationships, share knowledge with one another and learn about each other. Many of the ways that we operate as an organization and as a family of people who believe in this project, give us a glimpse of where peace lies.

Peace is not about completely eliminating conflict. Peace is the ability to accept multiple, perhaps contradictory, perspectives and emotions. Peace is engaging the world with willingness and flexibility. Peace is a release of boundaries and a way of living that is based in shared resources. Peace is a way of existing based in exploration and curiosity. There is no place in the world that is untouched by violence or war. We are all so connected to each other that we experience even our most peaceful moments through a lens of our other experiences of conflict. We frame our sense of peace through our moments of conflict. My understanding of conflict is interconnected with my thoughts on peace. I often think of clay as a metaphor for both conflict and peace. Clay is one of the oldest materials used to create a variety of items essential to cooking, building materials, musical instruments and early writing tablets. Clay can harden into a distinct form, but it begins without any specific shape. Depending on the environment in which the clay is formed and the process that humans impose upon it, clay can appear in variety of different colors, shapes and uses. Similarly, peace and conflict can be found in almost every part of our daily lives, they are always underlying our experiences. Further, peace and conflict, like clay, do not come in one definitive form. Depending on the circumstances and environment they are in, they react and show themselves in different ways. Peace and conflict are not mutually exclusive rather they are inherently connected. In conflict, one can find peace and in peace one can find conflict.

BPYI has been formative in my perspective on the interconnected nature of peace and conflict. Although our program takes place in a setting that is often associated with conflict and violence, we inhabit spaces primarily focused on mutual connection and exchange. BPYI has demonstrated how part of experiencing peace is in accepting conflict and how part of conflict is a desire for peace. BPYI has been exchanging thoughts with Mas'ha for several years now and we plan to continue doing so for a long time.

b. "BPYI is the most empowering demonstration of connection and sharing that I have experienced. This program has given me a sense of wonder about the word and a belief in people that is inextinguishable." -Jordana Rubenstein-Edberg

Photographs:

