

Learning English

LEAP

Advancement Program

Empowering students
to become their own
agents of change

Summer 2011

Vol.I, No.1

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About the LEAP Program

LEAP is an educational empowerment program for Palestinian refugee-youth in Lebanon. LEAP is dedicated to nurturing the intellectual and creative growth of its students and encouraging them to become their own agents of change through education.

LEAP is a grassroots volunteer program and our work and efforts can only be achieved through the generosity of our supporters and donors. We are actively fundraising to help support both our short-term and long-term initiatives. Please consider donating today and help us empower Palestinian refugee-youth in Lebanon!

For more information, please visit:
www.leapsummerprogram.org
or email:
info@leapsummerprogram.org

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Letter from the Founders

Dear LEAP Community,

On 1 July 2011, a team of 26 energetic American volunteers arrived to Lebanon and settled in the Shatila and Bourj el Barajneh Palestinian refugee camps ready to plunge into the massive task at hand: to deliver intensive English language instruction to nearly 400 Palestinian refugee-students. No amount of coaching or prepping could have truly prepared these youthful volunteers for the tremendous challenges they were about to face: sweltering heat, claustrophobic living conditions, daily power outages, frequent water shortages, and a group of spirited students who—like children everywhere—were ready to test the patience of even the most serene of teachers.

Despite these challenges, this wonderful group of volunteers rose to the occasion, succeeding beyond our expectations. Instead of spending their summer relaxing or taking paid summer employment, they lived and worked in the camps for the month of July, cheerfully delivering English lessons and extracurricular activities from 8:30 in the morning until 5 in the evening: frequently working extended hours preparing for lessons and attending required meetings.

In addition to morning and afternoon courses (at an 8:1 teacher-student ratio), the volunteers also offered recreational clubs, including photography, social media, filmmaking, theater, debke, creative writing, and even yoga. How lovely and inspiring it was to see the enthusiasm of these beautiful children as they stretched into various yoga positions, or trailed around their neighborhoods hunting for photographic subjects, or carefully edited movie scripts and poems.

On Fridays, the teachers, staff, and students all took a well-deserved break from the oppressive conditions of the camps and headed out on the road in an armada of rented buses. With the joyful sounds of debke music, clapping, and drumming flooding from bus windows, we drove off to an amusement park in Saida, toured the Saida Citadel, and went swimming in the Qasmiyeh River in Tyre (Sur)—our most popular destination. Middle-schoolers who might have had a hard time concentrating on English vocabulary and verb conjugations proved to be more than adept at splashing, swimming, picnicking, and dancing by the side of the river. Their favorite bit of mischief was tossing unsuspecting teachers into the water!

To cap off an intense month of studying and learning, we organized a closing ceremony and celebration at a school in the Bourj el Barajneh camp. Hundreds of children and their families enjoyed an afternoon of refreshments, face-painting, photographic exhibits, music and an impressive performance of student songs, poems, theatrical pieces, and choreographed debke dances. At the closing ceremony, each student and volunteer received a copy of a LEAP summer memory book that included class photos, student writings, and other memorabilia, in addition to a Certificate of Completion.

Over the course of this wonderful month of work, learning, friendship, and cultural exchange, our students had a chance to gain invaluable exposure to native speakers of English. Many of the youngsters made vast improvements in the English grammar, writing, and pronunciation. Most importantly, they were empowered and encouraged to become their own agents of change.

But our students were not the only learners. Volunteers learned about Palestinian history, culture, and language. Americans who were too shy to even say hello in Arabic when they arrived, left Beirut with words and phrases like *marhaba*, *salamu-alaikum*, and *Ramadan kareem*...slipping from their tongues with fluidity and ease.

Most importantly, the volunteers learned first-hand about the hardships and struggles that Palestinian refugees face, going on 64 years of dispossession and exile. They saw the catastrophic housing situation, the lack of basic health and social services, the poor educational and employment opportunities, and a deteriorating social climate. Most importantly, they learned that no just solution can be brought about without implementing the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

As we all packed and left Beirut in a stream of tearful good-byes to our students and friends, many volunteers expressed this heart-breaking sentiment: *We can escape and return to our comfortable lives in the States, but for our students there is no escape. This is their reality. What awaits them?* Knowing that the opportunities for Palestinian refugee-children are slim and the political landscape is grim, LEAP volunteers left Lebanon emboldened to speak out on behalf of the rights of Palestinian refugees who are so often neglected and forgotten.

Throughout the summer, we made so many warm connections and memories that it would be easy to become nostalgic. However, this is not the end of the road, but only the beginning. In fact, several of our volunteers have already signed up for next year's program. And so the cycle of planning and improving and, yes, fundraising, begins...

We hope that this LEAP newsletter—filled with volunteer writings, photos, blog links, articles, and student work will inspire you to find ways to get involved. We invite you to help us—by organizing a LEAP fundraiser, making a tax-deductible donation, spreading the word, or even volunteering with LEAP!

*With peace and until return,
Maryam Zohny & Fatema Zohny*



A word from LEAP board member Jennifer Loewenstein

As a long-time activist and volunteer, I was incredibly pleased and grateful when I discovered the LEAP Program. As a volunteer in the camps many years ago with a Canadian organization, I was delighted to learn about the first US-based volunteer program in the Palestinian camps of Lebanon. Helping to fundraise and spread awareness of this new program, I recruited several of my students at the University of Wisconsin to participate in Summer 2011. Near the end of July, I traveled to Beirut to see the Program, which we had been working on year-long, in action! I was impressed with the LEAP program that was so carefully created and coordinated by the Zohny sisters and their team of volunteers. Seeing former students from my modern Middle East History course—now volunteering as English teachers in Bourj el Barajneh and Shatila camps—had a profound and moving effect on me. Moreover, seeing the smiles and feedback from the students demonstrated to me that we are doing something right and this program is making a difference. LEAP is accomplishing exactly what I'd hoped a US-based program would do in the refugee camps of Lebanon: highlighting the plight of Palestinian refugees and reminding the world that no just solution can ever be reached without resolving the refugee question.

Jennifer Loewenstein is Professor of Middle East Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and also founder of the Carol Chomsky Memorial Fund.

- There are approximately 450,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.
- Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are prohibited by law from working in over 70 professions and trades.
- Palestinian refugees are not allowed to own property.
- 54% of students who sat for the Brevet exam passed in 2011.
- The English passing rate was 18%. Although this rate has increased 4% from 2010, it is significantly lower than other subjects: Arabic - 57%; Math - 42%; Physics - 62%; Chemistry - 67%; Life Science - 51%; Civic - 92%; History - 87%; and Geography - 92%.
- The Brevet exam is administered in English. Therefore, improving English proficiency will improve both students' English scores and performance in other subjects.



Thank You!

LEAP would like to extend a special word of thanks to our friends, family, and supporters who have helped to make our 2011 Summer Program a success! First, we would like to thank our co-sponsoring organizations: Al-Awda NY, Beit Atfal Assumoud, Iara Lee's Caipirinha Foundation, the Carol Chomsky Memorial Fund, ULYP (Unite Lebanon Youth Project), and the WESPAC Foundation.

A special shout out to the women of Beit Atfal Assumoud who cooked delicious Palestinian lunches everyday for the volunteers. In addition, we would like to thank Ahmad T., and the wonderful people who helped us deal with logistics on the ground: Sahar S., Mahmoud D., Moustafa H., and Mohammed B.

Most importantly, we would like to thank the volunteers themselves: Amir F., Boian B., Destiny S., Eileen C., Gabriela S., Hira A., Ibrahim B., Kira S., Kyle M., Maxwell L., Melinda M., Natalie G., Nevena D., Odai A., Ryan B., Salma Z., Aliya A., Vidaur D., William C., Yeou-Shiuh H., Zeyad O., Geneva G., Kim J., Leslie C., and Mariam F. Lastly, we would like to thank our coordinators: Fatema Z., and Alyssa M.

Yeou-Shiuh Hsu, Kim A. Jensen, and Maryam Zohny are credited for producing this newsletter.



Creative Writing, Poems, and Short Films by LEAP Program 2011 Students

Spring is Green

Spring is green
Like rough grass
Like the cool taste of mint
Like a clean t-shirt.

—Jana Abdo



Dracula

He has scary teeth
You don't notice that he's behind
He comes from under the floor
And he never knocks on the door
He disappears in front of the mirror
Then you feel horror
But you can impale him to die
And his spirit goes to the sky.

— Mohammad Hamid



Is This Life a Life?

Life is not always wonderful.
It's just wonderful for some people.
It makes us see weird things,
And we say that is not the truth.
But in the end, we realize that this is true:
Many people cheat their family and their friends for money
Because they think that money can buy everything.
But they are wrong.
Can we buy happiness with money?
Can we buy respect with money?
Can we buy love with money?
I don't think so.
Life isn't always life.

— Israa Nabhani



My Favorite Moment

Where is my favorite moment?
It is here.
It is there.
No, it's my heart.
My box of feeling and memory.
My book of love.
My beginning.
My end.
My real heart.

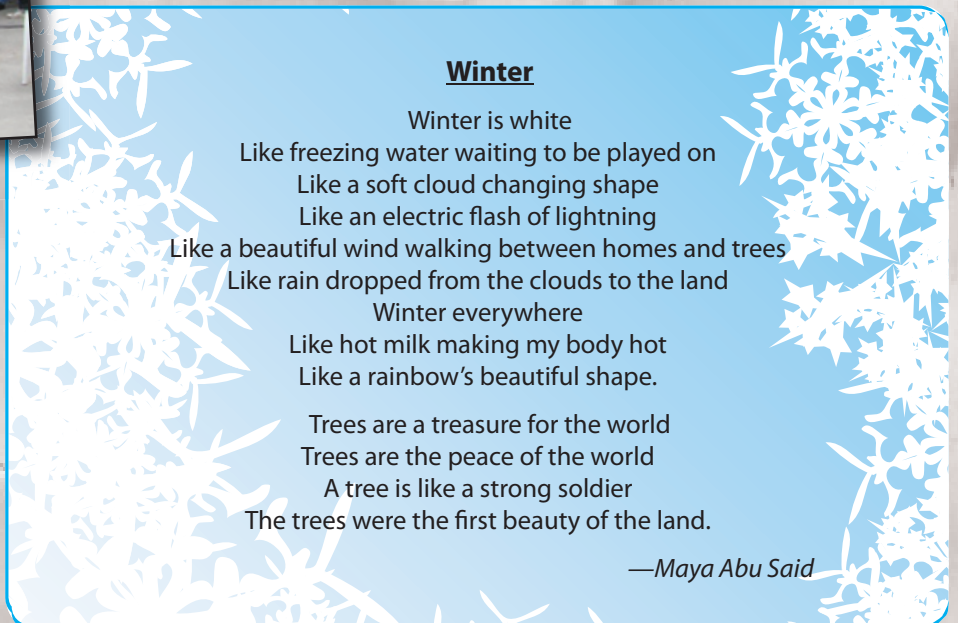
— Malak Ali Sheicha

Winter

Winter is white
Like freezing water waiting to be played on
Like a soft cloud changing shape
Like an electric flash of lightning
Like a beautiful wind walking between homes and trees
Like rain dropped from the clouds to the land
Winter everywhere
Like hot milk making my body hot
Like a rainbow's beautiful shape.

Trees are a treasure for the world
Trees are the peace of the world
A tree is like a strong soldier
The trees were the first beauty of the land.

— Maya Abu Said



Autobiography

by Wissam Al Hassan

My name is Wissam Al Hassan. I am fourteen years old. I was born on May 6, 1996. I live in Beirut, Lebanon in the Bourj el Barajneh camp. I have one sibling and he is ten years old.

My father was born in Al Bass of Palestine. My mother was born in Yaffa of Palestine. My parents came to Lebanon because the Israelis forced us out. I don't enjoy living in the camp because it is dirty. People are sad and want to enjoy the moment because they can't handle their life or self. I don't enjoy anything about camp life.

In the future, I want to work as a businessman in an accounting firm.



To watch "Shatila Shine," a short film made by LEAP students, please visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLou55VtObc>

Pollution and the People

By Hanna Al-Hariri

A beautiful girl named Lelo was walking in the forest when she saw garbage all around her and said, "Ooh me, what is all this garbage?" It was potato chip bags, chocolate wrappers, papers, and more. The girl named Lelo heard someone crying, so she began to search and shout, "Who is crying? Say something so I can help you."

The voice said, "Come find a big old tree."

She began searching and she found it. Then she said, "Where are you? I still don't see anyone."

The tree said, "Here. Here I am." Lelo was surprised at what she saw and said, "ooooooh my god! What is this? What happened to you, big tree? Why are you crying?"

"The people... the people are killing us. Every day 500 trees die."

"Why are people doing this to you?"

"People cut 130 trees a day, 350 die from pollution, and 20 die from other causes."

"What kind of pollution?"

"Everything."

"Like what?"

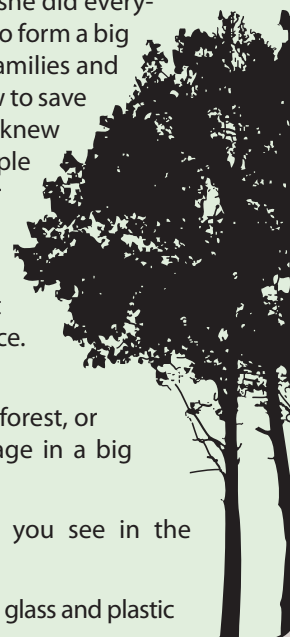
"Like potato chip bags, tissues, papers, chocolates with their wrappers... These things are killing us. Can you help us?"

"What can one young girl do?"

"Mmmmmmm.... I have an idea."

When the tree told Lelo the idea, she did everything she could. The tree's idea was to form a big group of young children and their families and teach them about pollution and how to save nature. The group taught what they knew to the people. Lelo taught the people the things the tree had taught her about how to save nature. These are the things she learned:

- 1) Don't throw anything in the forest or in the sea or in any beautiful place. Put it in a garbage can.
- 2) When you go to any garden, sea, forest, or your favorite place, put your garbage in a big garbage can.
- 3) Throw every piece of garbage you see in the garbage can.
- 4) Recycle garbage like paper, cartons, glass and plastic





by Maxwell L.

A month in a different country can change a person. A month living and teaching in a Palestinian refugee camp certainly changed me. Most of all I was changed and moved by my students. While I was struggling with the 12+ hour days and scorching heat that left me drowning in my own sweat at night, my students were reading, writing, and creating works of art in English about topics as diverse as the environment, freedom, and integrity. Amidst their yawning, stomach pain, and exhaustion, there was an ever present thirst for knowledge that will only be quenched when it is used to dismantle the structures of oppression holding them back.

I learned more from my students than I ever could have taught them. I learned that Nadine wants to be a lawyer in

France protecting the innocent. I learned that Khaleel wants more than anything to return to Palestine, and that he's an expert Debke dancer. Zouhair wants to be a dentist in the neighborhood helping poor people. Samar told me she is worried about the "depletion of the ozone," and she's twelve. Finally, in a moment that brought me to tears in front of the class, Sereen wrote this poem:

*Freedom for me is like a bird in the sky,
Is like everything in life.*

*When you have freedom,
You have everything.*

Oh how I love freedom.

I have freedom, but I don't have freedom.

Freedom for me it's just a dream in my sleep.

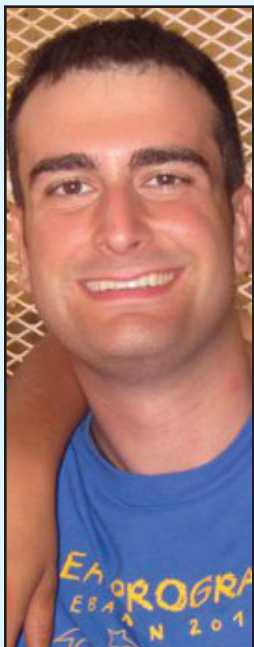
Oh how I love freedom.

I cross the sea to meet freedom.

Every breath of me says freedom, only freedom.



LEAP Volunteers Speak



by Amir F.

Just as I was beginning to question whether the kids would ever use their cameras to take pictures of anything other than Melinda and myself from awkward angles, one of my students took a photo I will never forget. We had given them the assignment of photographing the doors, windows, and walls of the camp, in hopes that they would practice playing with composition and lighting. Just as we were about to head back to Beit Atfal Assumoud, I saw Baker and Mohammad motion to me. They stood in front of a poster I had seen countless times before. They were pointing to the pictures of martyrs who had been killed while protesting at the border on Nakba day. The boys in the picture could not have been much older than my students. Baker told me the name of one of them, Imad Abu Shakra, whose picture he wanted to photograph. Seeing that the poster was torn, Mohammad instinctively reached up to hold it together while his friend took a picture. Baker proudly held the camera up to me, revealing an image that stirred unexpected emotions in me as I stood in that alley in the moukhayyam. I was staring at a hauntingly beautiful image, perfectly lit and framed, of Mohammad's tiny illuminated hand reaching out toward his hero.

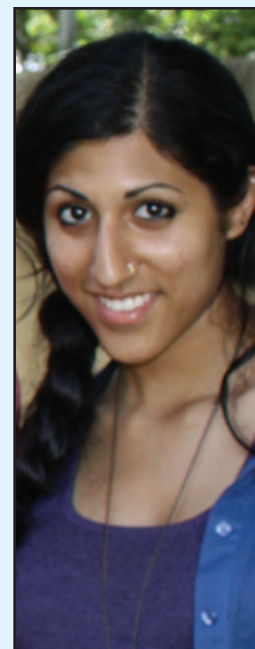


Some of my fondest moments from my month in Shatila are from my theater club—but some of my most challenging ones are, too. Getting a group of teenagers, some outgoing and talkative, others shy and quiet—to work together as a collective unit wasn't easy. In the beginning, it was difficult to gain their attention in order to explain the activities and exercises. But as they grew more committed to the final project, they worked harder and helped each other to improve.

One of my highest moments was when four of the boys in my morning group performed a silent play that they'd created on their own. They really shined, playing off each others' actions



with real passion and honesty; they clearly enjoyed what they were doing. And the play was hilarious! I was so impressed and proud that they had such great talent, and I was excited that others would be able to see it, too. Their silent play showed me that, regardless of the language barrier, theater can unite a whole slew of different people to enjoy one piece of work. Their enthusiasm and dedication taught me something I will always hold with me: that the students of LEAP 2011 are capable of a lot more than they are aware of. I truly hope that they will come to realize that potential as they continue on with their education.



by Hira A.

To Read More Reflections from LEAP Volunteers, visit their blogs at:

www.leapsummerprogram.org

In my first week teaching in Shatila, my students read a story called "Community Is Stronger Than Conflict," a story of two peoples—one indigenous, the other immigrant—who have differing ideas about the environment. Star, the indigenous people's leader, wants to protect the environment because of her people's connection to the land. Blue, the immigrant people's leader, feels that harming the environment is the necessary cost of economic progress. Dismayed at the continuing destruction, Star consults Elder Shine who, in the end, makes an appeal for the two peoples to rally around a unifying issue—their Land.

When I asked my students for some ideas on how they would handle this conflict, they had some brilliant responses. One student suggested that Elder Shine should "get a lawyer to tell the government that there are limits on harming the environment." Another student agreed with

Elder Shine that there is no other alternative than to protect the Land. Yet another student suggested that maybe "their peoples should divide the land. Star's people will protect their half of the land, while Blue's can choose to hurt their half." Overall, I was stunned at the students' thoughtful, bold ideas. My students were only 14 or 15 years old, yet they exhibited wisdom beyond their years.

This wasn't my only deeply affecting experience in Shatila, but it underscored the importance of LEAP. These refugee children carry within them tremendous potential; we have only helped them to express that potential by improving their English fluency and by encouraging critical thinking. Once these children have the opportunity to seize their right to self-determination, The Day of Return cannot be far off.



by Yeou-Shiuh H.

LEAP has big plans — and we need your financial help!

LEAP is a grassroots volunteer-run program and we need your help to make our program sustainable annually. In addition, we need your help to launch other initiatives like a year-long volunteer English program, youth centers, college scholarships, playgrounds, among many others!

Checks for tax-deductible donations of any size are greatly appreciated.

Please make checks out to “WESPAC Foundation” (with “LEAP Program” in the reference line) and mail to the following address:

**WESPAC Foundation, 52 North
Broadway, White Plains, NY 10603**

You can also donate online at:

www.leapsummerprogram.org/donate



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The WESPAC Foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization and the fiscal sponsor of the LEAP Program.