

The Silwan Ta'azef music school in Silwan, East Jerusalem

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Abstract

Music in Me is an international non-governmental organisation incorporated in the Netherlands funding projects in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories. *Music in Me* believes that music, having no borders, has the unique power to bring joy, alleviate trauma, stimulate self-confidence and foster mutual understanding. The music school in the Mada'a Community Center in Silwan, East Jerusalem, is one of their projects.

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Background of the project

In October 2007, Silwan Ta'azef Music School opened its doors to the children of Silwan, an extremely crowded and poor Palestinian village in East Jerusalem. The village is situated in East Jerusalem, next to the old city walls. Its location next to the temple mount (Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Wailing Wall) has put the village in a center of political strife, which has its negative repercussions on daily life in the village.

Since 1967, the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem live under Israeli rule. They hold special residency permits which do not allow them to vote for the Israeli Parliament, and which include restrictions on travel and residency. Although the residents pay taxes as all citizens of Israel, their needs and mainly their children's needs are not provided for. In Silwan there are no playgrounds, no green parks, no public library, no cafes, no cinemas, no sport facilities or public clinics. The residents are not permitted to build or expand their homes, and many families await the demolition of their houses.

The unstable political situation has a devastating impact on the village. There are about 50,000 residents in Silwan, of which more than 50% are under 19. 75% of the children are estimated to live under the poverty line. The rates of crime, domestic violence, child abuse, drug use and school dropouts are alarmingly high. This, combined

with the constant presence of armed guards and the Israeli military and police, creates difficult and stressful circumstances for the residents, especially for the children of Silwan.

The music school subsidizes the studies for children who come from poor families, and is supported by *Music in Me*, the Prelude Foundation and private donations.

The school offers two courses:

- 1 - Pre-instrumental, introductory year to music. A weekly lesson of 1½ hours, taught by two professional music educators, Danny Felsteiner and Fabienne van Eck, combined with guest teachers and performances.
- 2 - Studying an instrument in group lessons. Given by professional music teachers for each instrument.

All students younger than 10, must follow and successfully finish the first pre-instrumental year, before pursuing an instrumental study. In the first year, the school offered only the pre-instrumental year. 30 children, age 6-12, mixed gender, participated, and were divided by age in three groups. The music lessons take place in Madaa Silwan Community Center, which was established concurrent to the opening of the music school.

The music lessons

During the introductory music lessons the children learn the basic elements of music like pitch, rhythm and notation, and experienced playing a wide range of instruments from different instrument families, as well as singing alone and in groups (choir).

Next to the taught musical skills, the children also play social-oriented musical games, build their own instruments from different materials, listen to music from their culture and other cultures from all over the world, and prepare concerts in which they sing songs and play the instruments.

The year is divided in six blocks of music instruments:

- 1 - Percussion – tambourines, darbukas (tablah), bells, woodblocks, shakers, etc.
- 2 - Pitched Percussion – glockenspiel.
- 3 - Wind Instrument – recorders (with a presentation of the Arab nay and mijwez).
- 4 - Plucked Instrument – guitar.
- 5 - String Instrument – violin.

In October 2008, the children from the first year, as well as older children who displayed musical talent, chose an instrument they wanted to concentrate on and study exclusively in smaller groups during 2008. The group lessons were given by professional

music teachers. The following instruments were taught in 2008: guitar, cello, oud, piano and darbuka.

Social influence of the project

Since then, more than 65 children have registered to the different courses the school is offering, and the list of applications for the coming year is growing. The music school was the first activity to open in the Madaa Silwan Community Center. At first, parents were suspicious and reluctant to send their children to study music. In a society where children the age of 13, 14 start searching for jobs to compensate for the low income of their parents, music education seemed unnecessary.

However, soon parents showed up in the music school during lesson days, and expressed their gratitude. They claimed that they were surprised to see their children sing songs and practice instruments, and how much positive energy it has brought into their family lives.

In January 2009, the music school organized a concert in the village, to which more than 200 people came, parents and family members of the music school students. The children had the chance to perform and be proud of what they'd learned, and the parents could see their children on stage. Following the school examinations during February, parents reported that their children studied longer for the exams, and that their grades were improving. They were also happy that children stayed off the streets to practice music.

In 2008, the list of application was longer than in 2007, and the school accepted more than 30 children for the pre-instrumental year, and new students for the instrumental studies.

The music lessons contribute to social cohesion and have positive effects beyond the field of music. In November 2007, inspired by the opening of the music school, weekly art lessons started in the community center, where 20 children participated. Parents, women and men, showed interest in volunteering in the center and donating their time for the community. Soon, more activities followed such as language courses (Arabic, Hebrew and English, for women, men and children by groups), leadership training for adolescent girls, a traditional Silwani cooking project, an embroidery project, and books were collected to form the first library in Silwan, where mothers volunteered to read stories for children once a week. In spring 2009, the library opened its doors. In 2008, a swimming course was offered for men, and a new theatre group has started, taught by a professional actress from Bethlehem.

In the summers of 2008 and 2009, the activities of the community center culminated to the Summer Games: 6 days full of activities for the children of Silwan. More than 300 children participated, and the teachers from the music and art school joined to offer many different activities for the children. The girls that followed the leadership training were appointed as group leaders, and many parents offered to volunteer in arranging the activities, cooking, transportation and more.

The people of Silwan claim that although the political situation makes it difficult to see a bright future for their children and families, the community center has been a beacon of light in the neighborhood, and that it definitely helps to empower the community, and to raise the sense of pride in and commitment for the village.

Involvement

The Madaa Community Center is run by the Palestinian residents of Silwan, assisted by Israeli and international volunteers. The music lessons are taught by Palestinians, Israelis, and internationals, and we had guest teachers from all over the world (USA, Pakistan, England, Holland, Brazil, and more).

For more information:

www.musicinme.net

www.madaasilwan.org