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ACROSS THE BORDERS

by Danny Alexander



The singing over the opening bass and synth carried a quaver that sounded a little like American Indian song, but this was clearly hip-hop even before Arabic rhymes started cascading one after another. And all of that musical color served as a perfect complement to the slide

show Sara Jawhari showed of her trip to the Gaza strip. Yes, these pictures featured a few shots of forbidding walls and wire and rubble, but the spirit of the music emphasize the dominant images, one beautiful child's smile shining after another.

"I was getting mad during the presentation," one of the students told me after the talk, "but when I saw those kids' faces, I felt hope."

And, on February 22nd, that balance of heat and hope lay at the heart of a very important evening at my school, "Viva Palestina: Report Back from Gaza," hosted by Jawhari and the Johnson County Community College Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

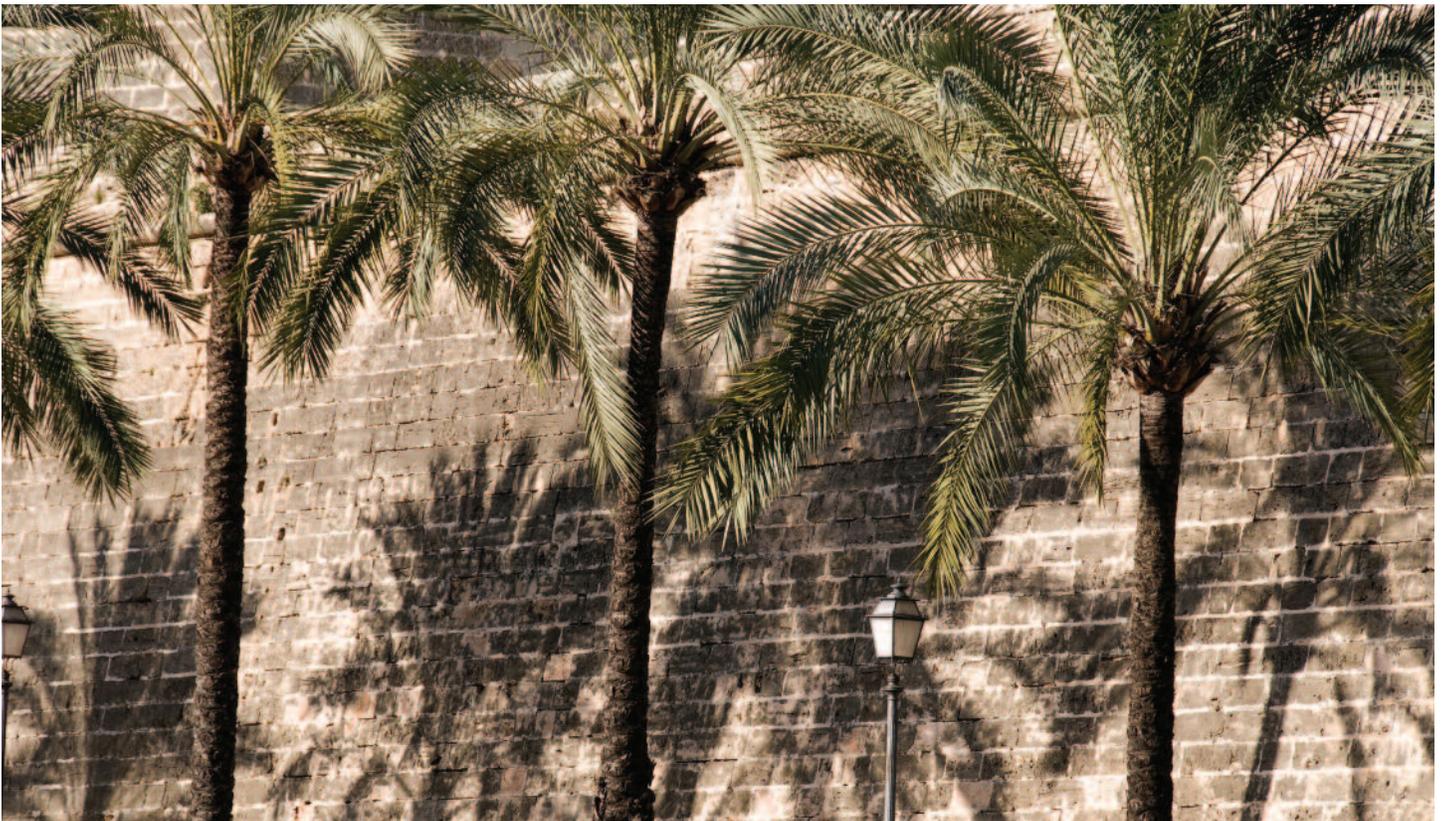
The Office asked me to introduce Sara Jo (as Jawhari is perhaps best known around school), and it was, indeed, an honor. Since I've been working with the diversity initiative,

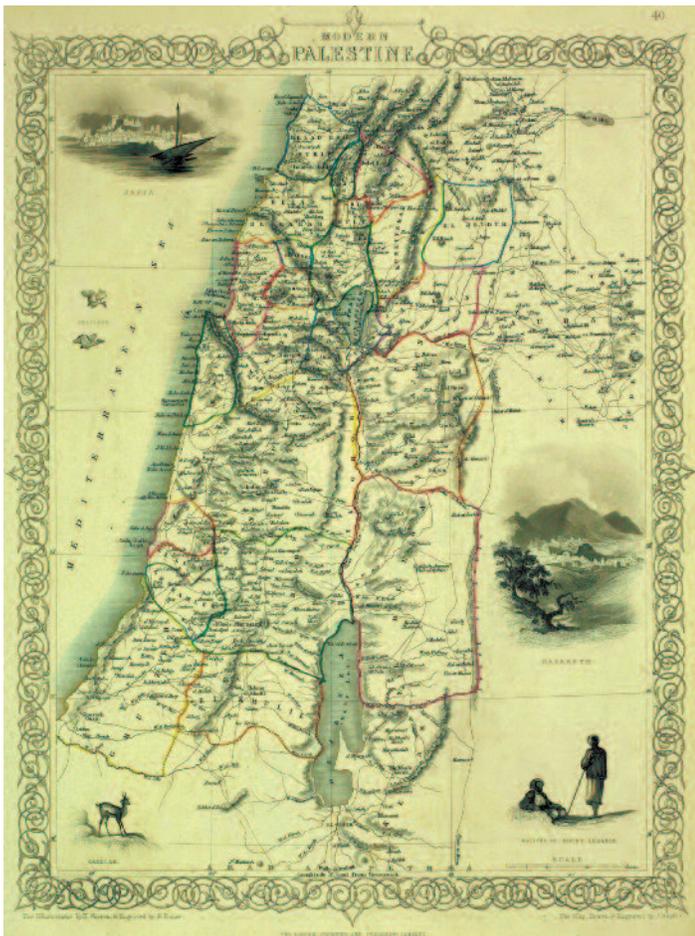
which takes me out of the classroom and into much more of the day-to-day life of the students around campus, I've been incalculably impressed by so many students, but it's hard to think of many who work as hard to change our campus as Jawhari.

As I said that night, Sara is one of our school's great unifiers, and Sara is one of our school's great builders. She has worked as a student ambassador to represent our school to the community, she has worked tirelessly with human rights groups, she's helped to network and mobilize students from throughout the city, and last year she played a key role in our first Multicultural Night Celebration.

For these reasons and more, many of us were excited when we learned Sara was going to be traveling to the Gaza Strip over our winter break. We were excited because we knew what Sara would do with such a trip. She would use such an experience to raise awareness, and she would use that experience to build and unify others around a compassionate vision.

Palestinian herself, Jawhari plans to double major in journalism and anthropology, and her dream is to travel the world documenting the struggle for human rights. During the Report from Gaza, she showed just how well suited she is for such a task.





Jawhari told the story of the delegation she traveled with to bring desperately needed medical supplies to the Gaza strip. Of six speakers, her presentation was perhaps the longest, but important. She dealt with the many difficulties the delegation faced trying to move through Egypt, finding itself in a police-instigated riot and interminably detained more than once. [For a longer version of that story, see <http://www.campusledger.com/news/2010/01/26/aiding-worlds-largest-prison>] But it was also riveting because, as she said and made us feel, “all of my senses were heightened” in the short time she was actually able to be in Gaza.

She told a story of trying to sleep in a hospital on her first night in Gaza and hearing a birth in a nearby room. She tried to explain the magic of “witnessing a baby being born, though not with my eyes.” Knowing the power of hearing a child’s first cry, I found myself thinking that is, indeed, witnessing the event, and it added a beauty that lay at the heart of the night’s presentation, the unending struggle for life in the face of destruction.

Then, she told stories of her encounters with the generous people of Gaza, particularly children, including an 11-year-old, she described as speaking as if she were 60, and a girl in a pink jumpsuit she would run into twice, whose family would almost coincidentally host her and whose picture, thankfully, would find its way into the later slide show.

She talked about the significance of the ruins in the strip, homes that served generations of a single family and that were completely lost to Israel’s bombs a year ago in December. She talked about the hundreds of stories she heard and how they deepened her perspective, recognizing how many of the efforts to isolate terrorism were horrifically keeping everything including food and clothing out of the hands of the people of Reza, people who were so generous with her and her delegation.

After Jawhari, spoke Mohamed Al-Housiny, a working architect currently pursuing an MBA at KU. Having grown up during the first intifada in Gaza, this experience was not as fresh and raw for Al-Housiny, but his testimony was every bit as passionate and moving. Though he was the first of the speakers interrupted by a frustrated group of Israelis in the audience, he emphasized precisely the key point, that none of us are guiltless when it comes to the kind of oppression that is taking place in the Gaza strip. Knowing his taxes contributed to the status quo, he plaintively and unforgettably declared, “I have blood on MY hands that I can’t wash off.”

His eloquent talk was followed by a passionate testimonial by Omar Bayazid, a Syrian-born business student who moved to the United States when he was 8. After apologizing that he wouldn’t be as eloquent as Al-Housiny, Bayazid also made an unforgettable impression, testifying, “I realized I came to be saved by the people of Gaza—by their manners, by the way they carry themselves.” He told of a farmer who had lost virtually everything, including two children, who maintained his faith saying, “I thank God for every day.”

As powerful as those three talks were, the next three speakers added an entirely new dimension to the evening. They were Melissa Franklin, Marei Spaula and Jodi Voice, three students from Haskell Indian Nations University representing the Comanche, Lakota, Muskogee, Creek and Cherokee Nations. They, too, had been to Palestine with an indigenous youth delegation that brought them together with the Palestinian Education Project (PEP), the Seventh Native American Generation (SNAG), the Middle Eastern Children’s Alliance (MECA) and the Xicana power group, HUAXTEC. Out of these experiences, they formed a group called the 7th Generation Indigenous Visionaries (7thGIV). Many parallels between the experiences of indigenous Americans and Palestinians resonated for them, including the history of genocide, relocation and elaborate systems of control.

Franklin spoke first, and she talked about the parallels between the Palestinian border wall and the walls that have traditionally segregated indigenous Americans, most notably the U.S./Mexico border wall. Franklin also pointed out how Haskell itself was established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs

as a way to isolate and eliminate the American Indian as a people. She told of the roots of the indigenous youth delegation to Palestine, which was not desired by the campus and had to begin with meetings in her living room.

Spaola spoke next, talking of the way the Palestinians he met on his trip surprised him with their interest in his background. "Tell us your stories," they said. "We thought Native Americans were extinct." Even so, he talked of how knowledgeable even the youngest people he met were regarding world events. And perhaps the most telling part of his story involved a moment when he was filming the Palestinians he was with and someone in an unfriendly crowd hit him with a rock. A young Palestinian told him, "Marei, come on. This happens all the time. Just keep going." The young man's acceptance of such hostility rattled Spaola and made him think about how we in the U.S. are generally buffered from such open conflict.

Finally, Jodi Voice closed out the evening by talking about the cultural exchange between her delegation and the Palestinians they met. She talked about how they wanted to come to visit our reservations, and her fond memories of how they all shared music and stories and laughter. "They have a beautiful culture and they are a beautiful people," Voice said, and she added, "They helped us to heal."

Voice also did a beautiful job summing up one of the most important aspects of culture. She said, "Everything we do – the songs we sing, the connections we make, the stories we share. This is our resistance."

After that, she played that song, the Palestinian statement of solidarity with the American Indian, *Resistdance*, by the Refugees of Palestine. As I mentioned at the beginning of this report, that song served to underscore the promise in the children's faces in the slideshow that closed the evening's formal events, and that moment gave a sense of hope to the student I talked to after the event.

For me, that spirit of hope as resistance was what the night was about. There was hope even in the fact that the group of Israelis that had a grievance with the presentation stayed long after to talk with the presenters, but that's not to say they left happy. And that's too bad, because I don't think anyone in that room saw the Israeli people as the source of the conflict. It's just so hard for everyone to get around all of the pain and resentment.

As an American who knows that the restructuring of the world after two World Wars has led to a series of oppressions for which I am certainly (albeit passively) responsible, I wondered how we could get past this concern of the Israelis that they were being blamed for all of the troubles between their government and the 1.5 million Palestinians living on

a tiny piece of land 25 miles long and less than 7 miles wide. I think all of the speakers pointed toward the answer—at two poles perhaps Al-Housiny's emphasis on our mutual responsibility and Voice's emphasis on cultural exchange as a form of resistance.

What the Report from Gaza said to this participant was that none of us are innocent, but the conflict was also not really between any of us in that room. As with so many issues facing our world today, people are being pitted against each other when it is actually a power structure that is reinforcing the conflict. As long as governments, whomever they represent, are not genuinely after the best interests of the people – the majorities and the minorities – then the political status quo will attempt to blame all of the victims and pit them against one another. It is only when we begin to talk about whose walls divide us and whose interests they serve and, indeed, the cost of the blood on our own hands, that we can begin to get to a strategy by the people, for the people and of the people. I saw and heard such a vision in the Report Back from Gaza, and as with so many times before, I'm thankful for this latest lesson from a group of students to those of us called teachers.



Sara Jawhari