



Updates from the West Bank/ Jerusalem

By Megan Buchholz

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Adapting to Life in the Desert

Coming from the Pacific Northwest "rainforest" to the dust, rock, and sand of the Middle East has been a huge change! As you can imagine, the climate is not the only thing that I have been adapting to. Our YAGM group arrived in Jerusalem on September 5th and have been busy learning about the region and its people since we touched down. We began our journey with 10 days of orientation in the Bethlehem area where we took introductory Arabic classes, did tourist-y sightseeing in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and spent time getting to know our new context and community. The highlights of orientation for me were visiting Aida Camp, a refugee camp in Bethlehem where we were able to learn about life as a Palestinian refugee, and a tour of the Old City in East Jerusalem. The history of the Holy Land is amazing!

Home away from Home

My roommate Sara and I live in Ramallah in the West Bank (10mi N of Jerusalem). We are living near the city center, across the street from the Hope Lutheran Church. We live below Hope's Pastor, his wife and 2 year old daughter in the parsonage. It is a very exciting place to live, with many restaurants and cafes nearby. Ramallah is the home of the Palestinian Authority (blocks from my flat), the UN headquarters in the West Bank, and international consulates which makes it a hot-spot for international NGOs, business, and political activity. There have been many peaceful demonstrations (which we have avoided) in Ramallah and elsewhere in the West Bank in support of the Palestinian bid for statehood in the UN. The economy of Ramallah continues to grow and as does the population. Needless to say, it is an extremely interesting and exciting time to be living here!

One of the most consuming things about living in Ramallah is that I must travel through a major checkpoint at least 4 days a week to get to the school that I volunteer at in Jerusalem. Palestinians that live in the occupied territories (do not have residence in Jerusalem) are prohibited from traveling to Jerusalem or elsewhere in Israel without a permit. For residents of Ramallah and the occupied territories, permits are rare and difficult to come by. Even with a permit, everyone must travel through a checkpoint which regulates who is entering Jerusalem. It is hard to imagine that most of the children living in Ramallah have never been to Jerusalem because of the Israeli occupation. The Qalandia checkpoint in Ramallah is the busiest and most congested checkpoint. On a public bus, it has taken me between 1 1/2 -3 hours to travel 10 miles from Ramallah to Jerusalem. Granted, this is a much easier task for me as an international. I am blessed to be able to ride the school bus with my students from Ramallah which saves me from some of the hassle of public transportation.

UN 194: The Bid for Palestinian Statehood

Being in the Occupied Palestinian Territory during the bid for Palestinian statehood has been extremely interesting and exciting. It has been rather strange to be here as an American because it is almost certain that the US will use its veto on the resolution as well as cut aid to Palestine if it continues to pursue a state. Fortunately, I have found that most Palestinians do not hold resentment toward Americans and they recognize that foreign policy issues such as this do not necessarily reflect the opinions of all Americans. In the week surrounding the bid for statehood, I was struck by the solidarity of the Palestinian people. There were Palestinian flags everywhere. In many ways it reminded me of the patriotism and national solidarity of Americans shortly following the 9/11 attacks.



The Jerusalem/West Bank YAGMs in front of the Dome of the Rock in East Jerusalem



Photo by Joseph Dana
Thousands of Palestinians demonstrating in support of UN 194 on September 21st. This particular spot is a 5 minute walk from my house!

Helen Keller School for the Visually Impaired

My primary place of service is the Helen Keller School for the Visually Impaired in Beit Hanina, Jerusalem. The school has students from Kindergarten to eighth grade who have a wide range of special needs. There are approximately 60 students, most of which are have partial sight and many who are completely blind. The students come from all over: Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and some are Israeli Arabs coming from near Tel Aviv. The Helen Keller School is part of both the Palestinian school system and the Palestinian school system, which makes it an interesting cross section of academic policy.

My role in the school is to assist in teaching Physical Education and English. Also, this month we will begin an after school program for students two days a week which I am one of the primary teachers for. For the after school program, I will be teaching crafts, music, games, and assisting students during study hall. Working with visually impaired children has been fun, rewarding, and I learn from them every day. Teaching PE to children with special needs is a very unique and fun experience, especially because there is such a wide range of abilities. Many of my students have trouble saying "Megan" and call me "Miss Manga" or "Miss Magnum" instead. I guess that is appropriate since I have difficulty saying most of their names! I love speaking both English and Arabic with my students and the teachers at school. My Arabic continues to improve every day, though communication is very spotty at times!

In addition to learning Arabic, I am also learning English brail! All of the students, regardless of their degree of visual ability, are required to learn brail. The school does not have many English brail books and I will be copying books in English brail for students to read. I love my students and faculty at my school. They make me feel so welcome here!

Palestinian Hospitality

I have been blessed to have been welcomed in by many in my communities in Jerusalem, Ramallah and in the Bethlehem area. I have never experienced such amazing hospitality! Whether it be dinner with a (large) Palestinian family, coffee or tea, juice with shop keepers, or elaborate wedding receptions, the people are welcoming and hospitable. They are always interested in talking to me about their experience as Palestinians and are also interested in my life and experience thus far in The Occupied Palestinian Territories. One of my favorite things about being here is learning the narratives of the Palestinian people. Family is the most important thing to these people, and I feel that it is because of the strength of families that Palestinians are such resilient people. And don't get me started on the food! My favorites include Waraq al-'ainib (stuffed grape leaves),



Courtney (another YAGM) and myself harvesting olives on the Mount of Olives

Maqluba (upside-down rice and baked eggplant casserole), Tabbouleh (minced parsley salad) and of course Shwerma and Falafel sandwiches. I could write a whole newsletter on the food alone!

Short Trip Home

In mid october I traveled home to Portland, Oregon for my sister Lauren's wedding. Though it was a short trip, I felt blessed to be able to return home for such a beautiful event with family and friends. Congratulations to Ben and Lauren Reese!

Olive Harvest!

The Olive Harvest started October 15th and will go through mid November. The YAGMs participated in the Olive Harvest at the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Campus on the Mount of Olives. Picking olives is a fairly tedious task, though it was a lot of fun! The olives from the LWF harvest are used to make olive oil which is given to those who make contributions to the Augusta Victoria Hospital "Fund for the Poor" assisting families of children with cancer with hospital bills. If you are interested in obtaining some olive oil, see <http://lwfjerusalem.org/projects/olive-oil/>



The language of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement seems strange to me considering I am living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The "Occupy Wall Street" movement is occupying with the intent to affect positive change for the economic underdog. Palestinians have been living under Israeli occupation for decades in an apartheid system that is intended to make everyday life impossible and drive Palestinians off of their land.

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Artwork on the wall near the Bethlehem 300 checkpoint



Photograph by: Yannis Behrakis

This is Wadee, one of the second graders at the Helen Keller School for the Visually Impaired.



The only thing better than Palestinian food, is Palestinian hospitality! This was a meal served to us by a family that we had just met.



My hairy lipped family at Ben and Lauren Reese's wedding on October 15th

