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Ahead of the game

A joint Jewish-Arab run program enables Arab girls from east Jerusalem to learn business skills

• Text and photos:
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It's not that we're angry at seeing all that you have in west Jerusalem. Rather, it inspires us to create a similar environment in our village," says 16-year-old Israa Alyan. She is one of 24 girls currently studying at the Arab Bizcamp program, which aims to "provide young Arabs with the opportunity to experience the process of starting a business."

The project, in its first year, is a collaboration between the Asper Center for Entrepreneurship at the Hebrew University and the Al-Muntanda Association, a collection of business people and intellectuals from the Arab village of Sur Baher, in east Jerusalem near Kibbutz Ramat Rahel.

The girls, all clad in modest clothes and headcoverings, were spending the day at the Djanogly Visual Arts Center in Talpiot, where they divided their time between creating clay sculptures and improving their painting skills. They giggled and joked their way through the sessions, in the manner of high school students the world over. Ranging in age from 16 to 19, they have enrolled in the program as an alternative to continuing their higher education at university or college.

According to Fouad Abu Hamed, a Sur Baher businessman who has become a mentor to the group, "These are girls

whose chances of studying further are low, so we want to help them gain the basic knowledge of setting up a business – from creativity and inspiration to insurance and taxation issues."

Abu Hamed himself is a perfect role model for the girls. Growing up "with no money at all" in Sur Baher, he pushed himself to the limit in an effort to improve his lot. Realizing early on the benefit of learning Hebrew, he began language classes at seven years of age, and by ninth grade was volunteering for Magen David Adom. Post-university, he took a job with human rights group B'Tselem, worked there for six years and "learned how the Israeli system works."

On leaving B'Tselem, he approached Clalit Health Services with the idea of setting up a clinic in his home village. It took some persuasion, but Clalit management eventually loaned him the start-up money, and he built a hugely successful clinic in Sur Baher, followed soon after by a second in nearby Beit Safafa.

Abu Hamed now has 10,000 signed-up members, and his success is an enormous inspiration to the girls of the Arab Bizcamp program as an example of how anyone can go from rags to riches, as long as the motivation is there.

"My favourite part of the program is learning about the experiences of others – such as Fouad – as it is their achievements that inspire me to con-

tinue," says Doua Ashhab, 17. Ashhab's innate confidence is just the type of characteristic that Abu Hamed says is essential for success in business.

He stresses the importance of both the Hebrew University and the Asper Foundation being linked to the project, as it helps the girls and their families understand that there are Jewish Israelis prepared to assist them in their learning. "On top of that, it is often the first opportunity that these girls have to meet Jews – whether they are teachers on the course, or businessmen who come to give them advice – and it helps them to avoid pre-judging Jews," he explains.

Ashhab agrees: "We never met Jews when we were growing up, maybe because we all learned at private schools [whereas some municipality schools do introduce Jewish and Arab children to one another]."

She and her friends got on famously with the sculpture teacher at the Djanogly Center, although the language barrier meant that the girls' supervisor – Mona Shalabi – had to translate for much of the time.

Shalabi, who comes from near Afula but is currently living in Sur Baher, speaks of the girls' achievements with pride. "They all come up with their own ideas and new, innovative ways to design – and you can see the results here," she says, pointing to the creations that the girls have sculpted.

"I hope to stay in touch with





Modeling success. The girls recently spent a day at the Djanogly Visual Arts Center in Talpiot, where they created clay sculptures and improved their painting skills

them, even once the two-month project has finished," she reveals. "Hopefully, if they succeed, they will graduate to the next project we have for them."

The intention of the Arab Bizcamp founders is to do more than just provide the girls with the skills needed to open their own business. There will be funds available to loan to the students in order to facilitate them turning their ideas into reality, and regular advice and encouragement will be available to them once they strike out on their own.

Ohad Ref is a director of the Asper Center, and quotes business tycoon Eitan Wertheimer when discussing the value of the program. "Wertheimer said he's glad that Israel doesn't have oil, since it means that we have to rely on research and creativity in order to raise the standard of life in our country."

"To this end, we run summer programs for disadvantaged youth from all over Israel, taking them away for two weeks to teach them business and science skills which they might otherwise never learn," he says.

However, their work with Jewish children comes to a

three-year halt when national service looms as they turn 18. But for youths in the Arab sector there is no such hiatus, since they are not required to serve in the army. "We work with young Arabs as a way of 'bridging the divide' between the communities," Ref says, "and [we] also aim to show them that they too can break out of the cycle of poverty that exists in their villages."

He is realistic about the future for the girls on the current program. "Of course, not all of them will be able to go straight on to open businesses, but even those who don't will at least be better equipped when they work in other people's companies."

Aside from the business aspect of the scheme, there is a palpable sense of realization from both the Arab girls on the project and the Jewish teachers and mentors who support them throughout the course. "I thought I would be scared to come here [to Talpiot]," says Alyan, "But, even though it's strange here, I'm comfortable."

Her view is reflected by Ohad Ref who, since he now travels regularly to Sur Baher and its neighboring villages, has "made friends in these places, and east Jerusalem doesn't feel like a foreign place for me anymore."

Bridging the divide. Arab girls get a glimpse of Jewish culture.