

Asper Foundation trains Arab women for work

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Staff Reporter

Canadian philanthropist and CanWest Global Communications director Gail Asper hopes that a new entrepreneurial program will empower Arab women in east Jerusalem to join the workforce and contribute to a "peaceful society" in Israel.



Gail Asper

Speaking to *The CJN* in Jerusalem during a weeklong meeting of the Hebrew University's board of governors – a position Asper joked she inherited from her late father, Izzy Asper, in 2002 – she said she was happy to facilitate a project that would bring Jews and Arabs together for a common goal.

In 2007, the Asper Center for Entrepreneurship at Hebrew University of Jerusalem joined forces with the Al-Quds Dialogue Center, a non-political organization in east Jerusalem created and chaired by an Arab entrepreneur named Fuad Abu Hamed.

The result was the east Jerusalem BizCamp – modelled after the Curry BizCamp of Entrepreneurship in Winnipeg – which was meant to provide young Arabs, including women from east Jerusalem, with the opportunity to gain experience and learn skills needed to start a business.

She said that while the BizCamp was a success that assisted young Arabs with their entrepreneurial goals, most of the male participants refused to work with women.

"So we decided, let's just work with the women," Asper said.

A three-year Empowerment Through Entrepreneurship program, set to launch in the near future with the help of the Canadian Friends of Hebrew University, was

established to provide Arab women with the opportunity to train for the workforce and become contributing members of Israeli society.

Asper said she was motivated to reach out to Arab women because while nearly 58 per cent of Jewish women in Israel are working, only 20 per cent of Arab women are in the workforce.

She said some of the factors that keep Arab women from entering the workforce are lack of support from their families, no daycare options for their young children and inaccessible public transportation in Arab villages.

"[Jerusalem] is a city that has major poverty issues... It is a challenged city. But all the stats show that if you get the women educated and out there working... that is the path towards a peaceful society," she said.

But Asper realized that training wouldn't be enough to foster change because the social and financial challenges that deter Arab women from participating would also have to be addressed.

"What good does it do to show them the sky and not give them the resources to fly?" Asper asked.

She wanted to ensure that the Empowerment Through Entrepreneurship program would provide the participants with scholarships, computer training, peer and networking support, as well as childcare.

There is no doubt that having an increase in employment will help boost Israel's economy – which has been growing by five per cent each year since 2008 – but this initiative could also have societal implications.

"Women who are more educated are going to be more global in their outlook... They're going to want to reach out. They're going to be inclined to want to be a part of Israeli society."

She said there is a lot of interest from women who want to get involved in the program.

"They're sharp, they've got a lot of ideas, their kids are a little older and all they need is someone investing in them and believing in them."

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Note: The Empowerment Through Entrepreneurship Program is also supported by Jerusalem Foundation Canada.

Clarification: CanWest Global Communications Corp. ceased operations in 2010.