

Child's play: Creating safe spaces in the OPT

by Catherine Haswell

Daily life for children in Jenin involves constant exposure to violence. The sounds of gunfire, the deafening whirr of helicopters and the blaring of sirens punctuate the nights in this northernmost major town in the West Bank. A good night's sleep is a dream.

Some mornings, it is unclear if a curfew is still in place, and parents make the difficult decision of whether to send their children to school or to keep them at home for the day. Many kids say their game of choice is not volleyball or hockey but chasing tanks and throwing stones at heavily fortified military vehicles. Some kids have been caught in the crossfire, or targeted as 'combatants'.

This precarious existence for the children of Jenin is what led Naim Sadi, a seasoned human rights worker, to the doors of UNICEF. Since July 2002, as a UNICEF staffer, he's been helping children to cope with the trauma of conflict, to express themselves in healthy ways that eschew violence, and teaching them to be leaders in their community.

Naim, 44, is a Palestinian refugee. He grew up in Jenin, one of the areas hardest hit by the continuing crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. His passion and motivation for helping youngsters come from the deprivations he himself suffered as a child.

He, his seven brothers and three sisters shared one room. There was no space to do homework and anyway, they had no pens or papers with which to write.

"I sympathize with their position and understand the difficulties they face every day," Naim says of the children whose external environment is studded with tanks, military jeeps and barbed wire. "I want them to have a better life than me and other refugee children of my generation. Most importantly, I want them to have more opportunities, and the confidence to stand up and make changes in their society."

He believes every child should have the right to an education, health care and opportunities to grow in peace – UNICEF's mandate exactly.

"It is our responsibility, as Palestinians and as humanitarian aid workers, to ensure that our children do not suffer, and will not to suffer in the future because of the long-term impact of the conflict," he says.

Naim's most terrifying ordeal – and what clinched his desire to work for UNICEF – was the destruction of more than 450 houses in the Jenin refugee camp by the Israeli Defense Forces in April 2002. The camp has an estimated 14,050 people, 40 per cent of whom are believed to be under the age of 15. Soldiers occupied his family's house and Naim, who was in Ramallah at the time, a city 110 kilometres to the south, didn't hear a word from them for 17 days. Jenin was closed and no one could get in or out.

Naim had first gone to Ramallah to study at university. He ended up staying on for most of the subsequent 18 years, documenting human rights breaches against civilians in the West Bank for various human rights organizations and NGOs.

The job with UNICEF in Jenin gave him the chance to return to the fold of his family. And a large family it is. His parents, seven brothers and their children all live in one big house. He and his two sons aged 11 and 14 – he is separated from his wife – have joined them, bringing the household count to around 40 people, a size not uncommon among refugee families. Unfortunately, the location of the house right at the edge of the refugee camp makes it an ideal spot for soldiers and snipers keen on a handy lookout. The fear of soldiers commandeering the premises is ever-present. With previous intrusions, the family has been squashed into one room and its access to everything – including the bathrooms – restricted.

When he first started with UNICEF, isolation was a major challenge. “In the early days of our work in Jenin, we did not have a car, or access to the country office in Jerusalem,” he says. “It was a constant effort to remain focused and motivated when our only contact was by telephone with project officers needing updates of the work in Jenin.” The two offices are just a two-hour drive from each other, but they may as well have been worlds away.

Curfews and incursions often meant that visiting staff were sent back to Jerusalem. The establishment of field offices in the Occupied Palestinian Territory in 2003¹ greatly improved communication and enabled UNICEF to help more children in the region. That raised the spirits of Naim and his colleagues in the field, who have developed a close camaraderie. That is partly because of the solidarity cemented by crisis, but also because of Naim’s warmth and friendliness – though he can be reserved with people he doesn’t know well.

He has a devilish sense of humour, according to colleagues, and is a very generous human being – with his time, his money and his energy. Naim’s workday schedule testifies to his energy – and his responsibilities. He wakes at 6 a.m. and doesn’t get to bed before 1 a.m. Before going to the office he takes his kids to school (when they can get there) and collects them at lunchtime, brings them home, and returns to work.

One thing he’s particularly proud of is how UNICEF has succeeded in changing the attitudes of young people who, as role models, carry much influence with their peers. Naim is closely involved with the Children’s Municipal Council of Jenin, a group of 30 youngsters elected by other children, coached by UNICEF and tasked to be leaders in their embattled communities. The father of one council member remarks with evident pride: “This group has taught my daughter how to think, not what to think.” Not only have these girls and boys learned to express their concerns more confidently, but also to frame them in the more global context of children’s rights.

“For me personally, this initiative is incredibly satisfying. Already, after less than one year, we have seen dramatic changes in their personalities,” says Naim, who makes himself available 24 hours, seven days a week, to the highly motivated adolescents that make up the council.

¹ UNICEF has zonal offices in Hebron, Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarem, Rafah and Gaza City.

If you can't take the conflict away from children, you can at least stop children from directly joining in the conflict. Preventing kids from mimicking the violent behaviour of adults is UNICEF's most important task, believes Naim, who is doing what he can to provide them with healthy alternatives. Despite the obstacles he faces as a result of Jenin's closures, he has helped local authorities rehabilitate playground areas where children can play.

For Naim, escape is hard, even after working hours. The constant tensions and restrictions in place make travelling through the West Bank to see friends in Ramallah, for instance, too difficult. They also blur the lines between professional and personal concerns. He and his family are constantly worried about their own children, where they are, who they are with and the number of school days they are missing because of curfews. Food is not too much of a problem for them, although during long periods of curfew Jenin's stores are not able to replenish their supplies. In the winter, gas and water can be difficult to get hold of. Naim's family does own a television set and he has access to the internet at the office, something that not many people in Jenin do.

After work, Naim is often called upon by members of his extended family and residents of the refugee camp to mediate disputes and help them resolve issues, which is one reason why he gets to bed so late. Naim would love one day to be posted abroad with UNICEF, to get a perspective of other countries locked in political and social turbulence, particularly in the Middle East.

The "little wins" are what keeps him going. "After you achieve some successes in the field, you get more confidence to go further and reach even more children," he says. The secret of his success is a simple philosophy. "It's based on earning the trust of other people. You have to do yourself exactly what you advocate for others."