NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

'One small thing we can do'

Pat Marrin | Mar. 2, 2009

May, Jaafar and Karam share their English poems during a Writers' Workshop in Damascus, Syria, in 2008. (photos courtesy Iraqi Student project)

KANSAS CITY, MO. -- May and Randa are sisters. Their young faces are strong yet vulnerable as they talk to an interviewer making a short DVD about the Iraqi Student Project, a fledgling but bold initiative whose goal is to help place and fund Iraqi students in American universities and colleges.

The sisters are among some 20 other young Iraqis gathered in the outdoor courtyard of a house in Damascus, Syria, where they come each week to the "Writers' Workshop" to improve their English skills in hopes of securing student visas to go the United States to complete their education.

May's English is accented but clear, and on the recording she speaks with a passion that helps her find the words to tell how she, Randa, their brother and mother came to Damascus in 2006 from Baghdad. Their story echoes those of Sara, Taif, Ali, Omar and others in the group, stories about kidnapped fathers, murdered friends, threats of violence from militias, the destruction of the physical and cultural infrastructure of Iraq from 13 years of sanctions and five years of occupation. These students are glad to be alive, but they share an uprooted and anxious existence with 5 million other Iraqis either internally displaced or living as refugees in neighboring Syria, Jordan, Egypt and other nearby countries. (Last names of students have been omitted to protect families still in Iraq.)

"Before the [American] invasion in 2003, life was OK, some limitations on freedom, but OK," May says. "After the invasion, I thought things would be better, but they were not."

She understates the terror of their life in Iraq. After three years of relentless urban warfare between insurgents and the occupying Americans, the 2006 bombing of the Shiite Al Askari Mosque in Samarra triggered a surge in violence. May's family is Christian, a minority, and was caught in the waves of sectarian cleansing and revenge. Her father was kidnapped by a group that never identified itself. Unable to pay a ransom, the family fled to Syria. A year later their father was released -- emaciated, exhausted and deeply affected by his ordeal.

"We came to Damascus to be alive," May says. "But they stopped my future." She is committed to completing her medical education and returning home to work with the war-traumatized children of Iraq.

Taif is 18. He tells a similar story of life in Iraq, a kidnapped father, sudden flight with only what they could carry. But his father is still missing, and when Taif, his brother and their mother arrived in Damascus, she suffered a heart attack. "I tried to take her to a hospital but couldn't because we were alone," he says. Through the Iraqi Student Project, he has been accepted into an American college where he plans to study medicine, specializing in cardiology.

A lost generation?

The project was founded by Gabe Huck and Theresa Kubasak, an American couple who moved from New York City to Damascus in 2005 after retiring from careers in publishing and teaching. The small, grass-roots effort is trying to place these young people in American schools at a time when immigration to the United States is still sharply limited and other official scholarship programs are still only on the drawing board. It highlights the need for a major commitment to prevent a "lost generation" in Iraq at a time when educated young people are essential to rebuilding their country after the war.

Huck and Kubasak began their Middle East involvement in the late 1990s with the peace group Voices in the Wilderness (now known as Voices for Creative Nonviolence), which was challenging sanctions imposed on Iraq after the Iraqis were driven from Kuwait by U.S.-led coalition forces in 1990. The sanctions, peace activists argued, prevented the rebuilding of water, sewage-treatment, electrical and other vital infrastructure systems destroyed during the war, leading to a breakdown of the health-care system that in the end claimed the lives of an estimated 500,000 Iraqi children. Huck and Kubasak defied the sanctions to make four trips into Iraq to deliver medicines and other supplies.

They came to Damascus in 2005 to learn Arabic and to act as a liaison for peace groups monitoring the war in Iraq. In their daily contacts they saw the plight of thousands of young Iraqis who had fled there with their families, safe now but unable to work or complete their schooling, left idle and futureless.

Reclaiming the future

During a family visit to the United States in 2007, Huck and Kubasak assembled a board of directors, applied for not-for-profit 501c3 status for the Iraqi Student Project, and hired a small staff to begin contacting schools about tuition waivers. Calling it "one small thing we can do," Huck and Kubasak set a goal to place the first Iraqi students by the fall of 2008. To support this ambitious goal, a network of volunteer English tutors was already working to identify and prepare the first pool of students in Damascus; Amman, Jordan; and inside Iraq. They faced a thicket of official forms, fees, interviews, applications and tests required to get visas, security clearance, sponsorship and funding to enable these students to begin a four-year odyssey separated from family and culture in order to bring home academic degrees and training essential to the future of postwar Iraq.

In August 2008, Huck and Kubasak were again in the United States, waiting in airports to greet the first of 14 young Iraqi women and men arriving after a 21-hour trip from Damascus by way of Rome, eager to begin undergraduate programs at 12 universities and colleges across the country, from New York to California.

Also on hand was Jane Pitz, the U.S. coordinator for the project, who had led the effort to place the first cohort and was already at work pursuing programs to place more students for the 2009-2010 school year. Now halfway into its first year, the project is struggling month to month to find the funds and the support to keep the program alive.

"The tuition waiver is one part," Pitz said, "but the real challenge is to find local support for each student." She needs sponsors to cover additional costs totaling around $10,000 per year. "We need people who can provide the family emotional support to help the student make it through the enormous cultural adjustment. Whatever it takes, they need to succeed," she said.

Pitz brings to her role with the project two decades of campus ministry at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind. She knows students and she knows the developmental and social issues that transcend culture for young people. One student pointedly told her, "You will be my mother." Pitz rolls her eyes and brushes back her thick gray hair. "It occurred to me that when these kids graduate, I will be almost 75," she said.

For the next four years, she will keep close track of each student, seeing their grades, sharing their adjustments and struggles.

Two colleges in Kansas

In December, Pitz came to the Kansas City area to visit two small private Catholic colleges. Her prospects of placing a student at the University of St. Mary in Leavenworth, Kan., are helped by a longtime friendship with Sister of Charity of Leavenworth Diane Steele, who knew Pitz in South Bend while Steele was earning a doctorate in philosophy at Notre Dame. The chances of placing another student at Benedictine College in nearby Atchison, Kan., are looking good.

Steele, Saint Mary's president, is already on board, saying participation in the project is "the right thing to do because the Gospel says we have to take care of them." Her sense of mission is matched by the skills to find the support funds. She is plainspoken and direct: "We practice the Vincentian model, getting the rich and poor to help each other." St. Vincent de Paul, a 17th-century French priest who founded the Sisters of Charity, was famous for his ability to match charitable works to generous benefactors.

St. Mary's serves many students who need lots of help, the "poor and smart," Steele says, the ones who can qualify for grants and aid, or the children of undocumented parents. She works with nearby Donnelly College in Kansas City, Kan. It has a two-year program strong on English as a Second Language. She also knows the brass at Fort Leavenworth's NATO training center, where officers from all over the world come, and she knows there is at least one officer there from Iraq who might be a resource. She is eager to welcome students of different religions and cultures, knowing they will enrich St. Mary's strong tradition of inclusivity.

Because people know the work of the sisters, Steele says she can pick up the phone, tell a donor about the importance of welcoming students from Iraq, and then say, "We'll give them full tuition. Will you adopt them, cover room and board? You will help me do this." When quid pro quo is a factor, she says she can always call on the sisters in the motherhouse infirmary to say rosaries for benefactors.

Later that same day, Pitz is sitting in Kelly Vowels' office at Benedictine College. Vowels is former admissions director and now director of development there. Like Steele, she is deeply connected to a network of alums and friends who welcome the chance to make a difference. She is proud of the college's reputation for strong support of international students and is ready to support the Iraqi Student Project. She nods as Pitz goes down the long list of acronyms that stand for requirements the students will need to apply for or pass: ISFAA, TOEFL, F-1, I-20, SEVIS. Vowels' job is to bring resources to needs.

Pete Helgesen, the young current director of admissions, also affirms the college's readiness to accept an Iraqi student, knowing the challenges this might bring to the American students who have never met a Muslim or who have differing positions on the war. "We have an obligation to help these students, whatever our views on the war. We'd be blessed to make this happen," Helgesen says.

Some phone calls have already been made. Support from Benedictine Sr. Anne Shepard, prioress of Mount St. Scholastica Monastery, and Benedictine Fr. Barnabas Senecal, abbot of St. Benedict's Abbey -- representing the college's two founding communities -- will help the project come to Atchison. Beyond the immediate benefits, Shepard knows firsthand the potential of this kind of outreach. In 1960, her community welcomed a young Kenyan woman to their college, which was then Mount St. Scholastica College. In 2004, that woman, Wangari Maatthai, won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with women and the environment in Africa.

The first Iraqi Student Project group of 14, with one semester under their belts, reconnected in South Bend over Christmas to share their experiences. Adjustments have been hard. Many report homesickness. "Iraqis are very family-centered," Pitz explained. "They normally live at home until they marry, and they are very close. Living in college dorms is not the same. It will take time to adjust to American culture."Some other students report being shocked at American students who text-message and use their cell phones during class. "Iraqi students come from a culture that holds teachers in such high regard," Pitz said.

The students prepare and share traditional dishes from home. They celebrate rituals to let go of past burdens and to express their hopes for the future. The Iraqi Student Project has launched. It is a fragile miracle, an experiment in goodwill and conscience, "one small thing we can do" to make things right again.

The war in Iraq continues, but for these students, preparation for a time of reconciliation and rebuilding has already begun.

Pat Marrin is editor of Celebration, *the worship resource of the National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company.*

Schools that have welcomed Iraqi students for the 2008-2009 academic year

tt

- Canisius College, Buffalo, N.Y.

tt

- Dominican University of California, San Rafael

tt

- Fairfield University, Fairfield, Conn.

tt

- Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa

tt

- Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, Ind.

tt

- Loyola College, Baltimore

tt

- Manchester College, North Manchester, Ind.

tt

- Saginaw Valley State University, University Center, Mich.

tt

- St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Ind.

tt

- Union College, Schenectady, N.Y.

tt

- University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit

tt

- University of Evansville, Evansville, Ind.

tt

- Webster University, St. Louis

t

Schools that plan to participate in the 2009-2010 academic year

tt

- Benedictine College, Atchison, Kan.

tt

- Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa

tt

- Hope College, Holland, Mich.

tt

- North Central College, Naperville, Ill.

tt

- University of Oregon, Eugene

tt

- Alverno College, Milwaukee

tt

- Beloit College, Beloit, Wis.

tt

- Clark University, Worcester, Mass.

tt

- DePaul University, Chicago

tt

- Goucher College, Baltimore

tt

- Nyack College, Nyack, N.Y.

tt

- Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio

tt

- Lewis University, Romeoville, Ill.

tt

- University of St. Mary, Leavenworth, Kan.

To learn more

For more information, to donate or to see the DVD mentioned in the story, to do www.iraqistudentproject.org

Printed in the March 6 Colleges and Universities issue of NCR.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/09/2013 - 15:39*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/one-small-thing-we-can-do