



Zajel International Work Camp 2006: “Meet Palestine: In memory of Asem”

The Zajel Youth Exchange Program of the Department of Public Relations at An-Najah National University, ended its 2006 International Work Camp “Meet Palestine, In the Memory of Asem” with an official closing ceremony at the University auditorium.

The work camp ran from July 12th-30th, 2006, and could count on the participation of 24 international volunteers from 11 different countries in Europe, Africa, North-America and Asia, and on the assistance of over 20 local Palestinian volunteers. The aim of the International Voluntary Work Camp was to provide international volunteers the opportunity to meet and discuss the Middle Eastern conflict, share ideas, enhance their practical skills, foster exchange between Palestinians and the wider world, and give assistance to members of the Palestinian community.

Local and international volunteers worked in the Social Development Center of Askar refugee camp, where they hosted workshops in drama, circus, dancing, arts, sports, games, and music. The workshops were both educational and recreational, and provided some welcome psychological release and all-important fun to the children of the camp. Many of them suffer stress due to the occupation and its effects on daily life. The workshops hosted by the camp participants brought a ray of sun to them in testing times. Due to a prolonged Israeli invasion which prevented access to Askar refugee camp for a number of days, the volunteers also contributed their efforts to the city services of the Municipality of Nablus.

Apart from providing an opportunity to volunteer at Askar refugee camp, the International Work Camp also offered its participants an inside view on cultural, social and political life in Palestine. This educational aspect of the camp took the form of study tours, lectures on diverse subjects, discussions, meetings with prominent local and extra-local figures, and a host of cultural activities.

Zajel means “messenger,” and it is our firm belief that cultural exchange is crucial to change the situation we live in. Our international volunteers will hopefully spread what they have learnt and seen here to their families, their communities, and their media. However, cultural exchange happens on many different levels, and the camp also fostered exchange on a micro scale. This was not only beautiful to see but also just as important – it means Palestine got under everyone’s skin and it’s there to stay.

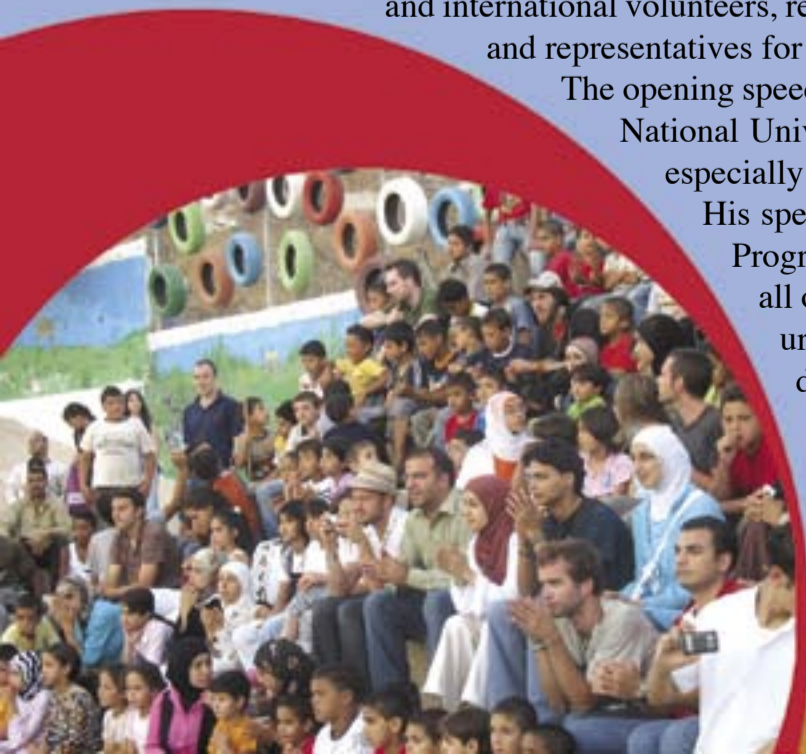
Our sincerest thanks go out to everyone who made the Zajel International Work Camp 2006 “Meet Palestine; In the memory of Asem” a success. Thanks to An-Najah University, to the Askar Social Development Center, to all local partners without whom this endeavor would not have been possible, and last but not least to all the local and international volunteers who contributed time, hard work, courage and heart.

Closing activities:

The official closing ceremony was held in the Zafer Al-Masri auditorium of An-Najah National University, and was attended by the local and international volunteers, representatives of various partner organizations, representatives of the Ministry of Education, and representatives for An-Najah National University.

The opening speech was given by Saed Abu-Hijleh, Director of the Public Relations Department of An-Najah National University, who thanked the international volunteers for showing their solidarity and support, especially in these times of great instability in the region.

His speech was followed by a short word by Alaa Youssef, Coordinator of Zajel Youth Exchange Program. Mr. Youssef expressed his gratitude for the trouble-free proceeding of the camp, despite all odds. He mentioned, “We were preparing ourselves for an early end of this camp and had an urgent evacuation plan ready. That didn’t happen and we continued the camp despite all the difficulties! Your determination pulled us through.” He also paid tribute to Asem Youssef, a talented young local volunteer who passed away earlier this year. The International Work Camp “Meet Palestine” is dedicated to his memory.



The next speaker was Mr. Amjad Rifai, Director of the Social Development Center of Askar refugee camp. He expressed his gratitude for the excellent working relationship between the Zajel Program and the Social Development Center, and concluded his speech with a heartfelt word of thanks to the international volunteers for the great work they performed at Askar refugee camp.

The final word was reserved for Holly Kilroy, a work camp volunteer from Ireland who, in her eloquent and touching speech, undoubtedly spoke for all the international participants when she said, “the perception of Palestinians in the west has been distorted and their plight is ignored by media, we will talk to people when we go home. The people of Nablus are ambitious, we saw their life, we have learned in this work camp more than we could have got from many books. We have shared laughs and smiles and the people of Nablus have been incredibly welcoming”.

After the speeches, both international and local volunteers received an official work camp certificate of appreciation from the work camp steering committee. The ceremony was followed by lunch in a nearby restaurant.

In the evening, the volunteers were invited to a Debka performance (Palestinian folkloric dance) at Askar refugee camp. It was the last goodbye to the children they had been working with over the past weeks, and the goodbyes were understandably emotional. The evening was concluded on a happy note with a birthday party for Abulhassan Al-Jaberi, an international volunteer from The Netherlands.

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Voluntary work:

The original aim of the work camp was to offer its participants the opportunity to work with the children of Askar refugee camp at the camp’s Social Development Center, and despite the fact that an Israeli road block prevented the volunteers from going to the eastern part of town where Askar is located for four entire days, they still managed to bring a lot of joy to the camp’s children. The road block formed part of a major military campaign by the Israeli army which left six Palestinians dead, more than 50 wounded, and an entire building complex used by the Palestinian Authority and several municipal services destroyed completely.

The volunteers hosted workshops in drama, circus, dancing, arts, sports, games, and music at the Social Development Center of Askar refugee camp to children aged between six and twelve, each workshop brought a mix of educational aspects and plain old fun. Nuno Coelho, a volunteer from Portugal, explains some of the activities of the children in the arts workshop, “I was designated as responsible for the Arts classes and we’ve been doing drawings, doing some masks, hats, anything that we can possible make out of paper, carton, scissors, glue and coloring pencils.” The workshops not only aimed to teach children new ways of expressing themselves, but also emphasized essential life skills including collaboration, self-analysis, empathy with others and community building.

Next to the workshops, the international volunteers also produced a wonderful mural on one of the walls of the Social Development Center. The mural was a collaborative effort under the direction of Nuno Coelho, and turned out quite nicely.

Due to the above-mentioned roadblock, the organizers were forced to implement a Plan B for voluntary work. During the interval when work at Askar was impossible, both local and international volunteers contributed their efforts to aid the Municipality of Nablus. They devoted many hours of hard labor to cleaning up the Municipal Park.



Lectures & discussions:

The educational part of the International Work Camp 2006 took the form of a mixture of lectures, discussions, documentary screenings and study visits. The program was varied and thought-provoking. Mr. Saed Abu-Hijleh, Director of the Department of Public Relations, lectured on the history and political geography of Palestine. Alaa Yousef, coordinator of the Zajel Youth Exchange Program, gave a slide presentation on the history of Palestine in pictures. The presentation focused on images of Palestine before and during the Nakba (The Catastrophe) of 1948, and drew on the extensive picture archive of the Zajel Program.

Ms. Maysara Soboh, introduced the issue of women's rights in Palestine, and the role of women in the Palestinian liberation movement. She interlaced her broader analysis of the role of women within Palestinian politics, culture and society with a personal account of her own experiences and growing involvement with feminism.

Mr. Daoud Abu Seir, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council associated with Hamas, gave a much awaited talk on the history and program of this party. After the talk, a barrage of questions was fired at Mr. Abu Seir.

The program of lectures was complemented by documentaries partially or entirely set in Nablus. "Such a normal thing," made by Rebecca Glotfelty, was screened, as well as "Route 181," a gripping documentary by Eyal Sivan and Michel Khalifi which was very much appreciated by the work camp participants. Mohammed Ali, a participant from Britain, remarked: "The documentary was a reality check to what we believe about the situation in Palestine, especially for all of us coming from England and Europe. I wish this documentary would be distributed all over the world."

Another documentary, "Shots that bind" by Kloie Picot, was screened as an introduction to a talk on journalism in Palestine by two local photographers, Ala Badarneh and Abdul Raheim Qusini, who work for Reuters. Kloie Picot produced the film when working as a long term

volunteer for the University in 2003. The film shows the triumphs and sorrows of the local press corps during the 2003 invasions of Nablus.

A very successful initiative was a night of discussions moderated by international volunteers Gregory Melus and Abulhassan Al-Jaberi on a number of controversial topics: the right to return, bombings and a one- or two-state solution. The moderators managed to steer the discussions away from the clichéd and the night was useful in generating some heated discussion and interesting lines of argument.

The lecture program also fostered cultural exchange by having international participants give talks on the history and politics of their home countries: Holly Kilroy and Rory Myles Byrne presented on the history of Ireland, Mishal Ovtchinnikov on Switzerland and its political system, Gregory Melus on the influence of the Israeli Lobby on US foreign politics, Loes de Kleijn talked about The Netherlands' culture and political system, Isabel Suárez Garzón and Amaia Bengoetxea Monteys presented the history of Spain, Nuno Coelho talked about Portuguese history, Zubair Hoosen about the history of South Africa, and Moon Kyungyoung about Korean history.

Study visits:

Next to the program of lectures and discussions, numerous study visits gave the work camp participants the chance to get to know the local landscape of political, religious and cultural organizations better, and provided an opportunity to meet key local policy makers.

Work camp participants had the opportunity to visit the city council and talk with Adly Yaish, the current mayor of Nablus, who explained the dire financial situation of the municipality, and measures the municipality is taking to minimize damage due to the occupation. They also visited Bassam Al Shakaa, who was the first elected mayor of Nablus from 1976 to 1981, and survived an Israeli assassination attempt. Mr. Al Shakaa gave□

Also on the program was a visit to the Yafa Cultural Center in Balata refugee camp, where the volunteers received a talk on the history of Balata and the activities of the center by Head of the Board, Tayseer Nasrallah. This was followed by a gripping eye witness account of the Nakba. The evening was concluded by a tour of Balata refugee camp.

Though a predominantly Muslim city, participants got a taste of the cultural diversity of Nablus through a lecture on Christians in contemporary Palestine by Father Yousef Saadeh of the Greek Orthodox Church of St-George in Nablus. There was also a visit to the Samaritan community on the top of Mount Jerizem where they received an introduction to Samaritan beliefs.

Participants visited a number of local medical and charitable NGO's: the Arab Women Union Society Orphanage and Hospital, Palestinian Medical Relief Center, and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. Adam Kershaw, volunteer from Britain remarked about the latter, "a lovely place, colorful and sunny, apart from all the windows which had been broken from the Israeli bombardment of the compound just below."

A visit to the industrial zone of Nablus clearly showed the economic stranglehold the occupation exerts on the city, but at same time it was also a tribute to how the entrepreneurial spirit of the Palestinians perseveres despite all odds.

Similarly ambiguous feelings were evoked by a tour of the old city of Nablus, which showed the city in all its ancient splendor and contemporary liveliness, but at the same time testified to the immense toll – in buildings and in human lives – the occupation has taken on the city. A visit to Joseph's tomb and the eerie post-apocalyptic site of the former compound administrative complex further hammered the point home.

Entertainment:

Of course, no work camp would be complete without a chance for some down time and fraternizing. The local volunteers prepared a full program of activities that included a traditional Dabka performance (Palestinian folkloric dance) at An-Najah National University, a visit to

a Turkish bath (complete with nargila and sweets), visits to coffee shops, local restaurants and rooftop hotel patios, and the sampling of delightful alcohol free cocktails.

The highlight for many was a picnic on the northern mountain of Nablus with singing, dancing, talking and eating delicious food in the mouth of a huge cave overlooking the whole city.

In the spirit of fraternity and exchange, the international volunteers were literally invited into the lives of our local volunteers. There was a lovely birthday party at his family's house for Nidal Sbeih, a local volunteer who'd just turned twenty. His family prepared a feast for all of the guests, and the party ended with cake and singing "Happy Birthday" in at least ten different languages. Guests were also kindly invited to a wedding, which was a special and unforgettable experience in its own right.

Some first impressions:

Abulhassan Al-Jaberi – the Netherlands

My new friends, my new home

When I met the internationals in Jerusalem, I was still wondering whether the camp would live up to its expectations. But then I met the locals. Spontaneously I started teasing and acting like I knew everyone, locals and internationals, for years. That was exactly how this camp was: i felt like we had been friends for years and we had last seen each other only the day before... Seriously, from the first moment in Abdelrahim Jerdani School we just started chatting and laughing.

The Askar kids amazed me most. These kids... under these circumstances... are full of enthusiasm, life, joy and energy. From the moment I saw them I became one of them: playing with them every day, being ripped apart by ten of them, being chased by twenty of them, buying candy bars for seventy of them... and afterwards missing all of them.

It feels like I'm more experienced now and I know more about me. People go through the worst things here and they can still have a good time. It hurts to see them suffer. I started to regard the Palestinian cause as an even bigger duty. I really hope I can give them something back in the future.



Adam Kershaw - UK

Keep pushing

I can't remember the last time I met so many nice, interesting, smart people in one place. This workcamp came about by chance for me, and up until the last minute I didn't think I would have enough money for the flights. Thankfully, I made it, and I'm so glad I did.

It has been a really inspiring experience, and I've made friends that I'd like to keep for a long time to come.

I hope you guys enjoyed the camp, and that you learned some things from us internationals. I'm going now, with so many happy memories and great experiences, and an altered perspective on Palestine.

Keep pushing. I (and many others) will be thinking of you all for a long, long time. Inshallah, this is not goodbye.



Mohammed Ali Amla - UK

My brothers and sisters in Nablus

My heart always longed to travel to the blessed land of Palestine. I didn't know what fate had in store. The only words I can use to describe these last few weeks, is it's been an 'emotional rollercoaster'. I've smiled, I've laughed and surely I have cried.

Why so many tears you may be wondering? My tears began in the Old City of Nablus, as we were given a guided tour; to visit such an old city is an honour especially when each road has 100 stories to tell, very much like all the people you meet. Each child at Askar will bring a smile to your face. However, each has his/her own story to tell which would soften the hardest of hearts. When children have their childhood stolen by the occupation, the psychological scars are apparent. The

children make the most of the opportunities available and you will always see them playing and smiling.

Coming to Nablus has taught me many lessons. One which I shall never forget about the Nablusian people: no matter how tough life becomes they keep continuing with life. To live is their only hope for a better tomorrow.

I have never felt as welcome as I have been in Nablus. I came as a stranger but was greeted like a brother. It's been great to share thoughts and emotions: at such a turbulent time in history we discussed, debated and disagreed. We shared many smiles and many tears, I'm sure I'll be in contact with this diverse group of new friends, I will never forget my brothers and sisters in Nablus who have a special place in my heart.



Fernando Peinado Alcaraz – Spain

I've renovated all my energies

This is my 2nd visit to Palestine and I feel I've renovated all my energies and I am sure I'll come back soon. I love staying in this country because I feel very close to this friendly and hospitable people and Palestine will always have a place in my heart.

I have the dream of becoming correspondent in Palestine. In case I don't achieve this I will fight for your rights whatever I do in my life. I thank the Zajel program for all your good work, now it's my turn to work when I come back to my country. Be sure I will do my best!

Gregory Melus – USA

Their love of life and untiring spirit is an example to everyone

This was an unforgettable experience that has impacted me in ways I have not fully understood. I thoroughly enjoyed every part of the camp. How do you describe the friendliness and warmth of an entire people who overcome so much!

Every local volunteer made me feel extremely safe and welcome in their hometown. The lectures were very intensive. I feel that I have a more accurate perspective of the situation, and I have real experience to support my conclusions. It allowed me to reflect on my personal beliefs as well as some of the minute differences that exist between the faiths.

The cultural events were fun, and of course the work at Askar was extremely rewarding. Working in a refugee camp was inspiring because seeing children's resiliency in such a difficult situation can only make me stronger. Their love of life and untiring spirit is an example to everyone.

I would like to thank all the volunteers from the bottom of my heart. They showed so much patience with the international volunteers and were wonderful hosts. I look forward to keeping in touch with everyone, as much the internationals as the locals, and God willing we will see each other again.

Holly Kilroy – Ireland

We have learnt more than a thousand books could teach us

I could never have imagined the time I have spent here in Palestine. We all know about the conflict but no one can possibly realize the extent of it till they're here. Every single person has a story to tell; every single person, a tragedy. And still, we did not find a broken people, but a people strong, proud, ambitious and full of a joy for life.

We came here expecting to teach kids and see what life was like in Palestine. Instead we have learnt more than a thousand books

could teach us. We have not only seen what life is like here, we have lived it. We have felt the sorrow and the anger as well as sharing so many laughs and smiles.

The people of Nablus are the most welcoming people I have ever met and the kids are just fantastic. So energetic, enthusiastic – classes were never boring! Despite all the troubles they face on a daily bases they laugh and play as if without a care in the world. So many are so smart, we can only hope they get the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Yet we know now, the sad reality is that many of them won't. Checkpoint hold ups, humiliation, falling in with the wrong crowd and being witness to the horrendous war crimes

of the Israelis: these stifle the potential of so many one could almost give up hope.

But then we look to the local volunteers of Zajel and of Askar. These people have strived to make a difference. Despite the difficulties that each and every one of them has faced, still face and will face, they work to help people in the same situation as themselves, to help foster a better future for the people of Palestine. I really do wish we had more people like this back home.

All our worries and complaints seem so petty and meaningless standing next to them. Our three weeks in Palestine have taught us the fatal danger of our ignorance, a few words of Arabic, and most of all an awe inspiring les-

son in the strength of the human spirit. Hopefully what we contribute is not just contained in these three weeks but instead what happens from here, what we say and do when we get home.

In our hearts and in our minds,
This is the start of something big.
Thank you Zajel, thank you Askar
Thank you Palestine



Loes de Kleijn – the Netherlands

Why can't I bring you guys with me?

At this moment, at the end of the camp, I feel like I'm leaving all my friends, I want to go home to see my old friends, but why can't I bring you guys with me?

The whole camp was an experience I will never forget. I learnt so much and met a lot of people; I feel like some of the volunteers will be friends for years.

If I tell you about my feelings towards the kids I would talk for hours. I really enjoyed my time with them and I wish I could have seen them more often. Every time I saw the smiles on their faces I felt so good... Every time the kids were doing the dances I taught them I felt like I really gave them something to remember, and I felt so proud that I taught my kids to do these dances. My feelings about the whole camp: Great, I loved it!



Mark Robert Hesling – UK

I am already thinking about my next trip here

There must be something about Nablus that I really like because this is my second time here. I haven't even left yet and am already thinking about my next trip here next year. At first it can seem like a large, bustling, intimidating place but actually it's one of the friendliest, warm and welcoming places I have ever been to in my short life. The locals are embarrassingly hospitable, the internationals are great people, and the time I spent here – though now it seems like it's gone in a flash – will live with me as a very happy memory.

Time flies when you're having fun, but I hope it was not just that, and whilst we are here and whilst at home we can do whatever we can to help make



Micha Ovtchinnikov – Switzerland

Just one big family

The consequences of the "Information War" are very apparent here and the situation is unjust to an extreme, yet seeing it in practice gives an insight as to how to combat the plague of propaganda, here and back at home.

The experience provided by the Social Development Centre in Askar Refugee Camp and the kids has proved to be beyond the craziest expectations I have ever had. Apart from one or two distinct features of my life back home, nothing is as pure as the friendship the kids and volunteers have created and cherish. This was a great test, a practical one, for the promotion of human dignity. One word: respect.

I would never have thought to see a city as beautiful as this one amidst the horrors. Nowhere have I felt that the city is just one big family as it is here. As a human I am attracted to this place and it truly is home to me.



Nuno Coelho

Friends in Palestine

I have to say I enjoyed so much being outside my daily environment back in Portugal, coming to Palestine and being surrounded by such interesting, dynamic, cheerful people – both local and international.

Sometimes I felt that working with children

was an excuse to make us come here and have loads of lectures on Palestinian issues, because it seemed we spent so few mornings in Askar. Anyway, I enjoyed the lectures, and to be told about Palestinian issues was also another reason to come here in the first place.

Apart from the more intense moments (for the first time I heard shots and bombs in my life) I never felt in danger as the staff always took good care of our security. Sometimes they were extra-super-ultra-careful (never letting us alone for a moment) which made me feel I was ten years old again. That was a bit annoying, but that I'm also thankful.

Count on me to be a Zajel ambassador back in Portugal! Now I can say I have friends in Palestine.

Rory Myles Byrne – Ireland

Inspiring, amazing, sad, traumatic, overwhelming and fun

Inspiring, amazing, sad, traumatic, overwhelming, fun – the adjectives to describe this experience could fill a dictionary. Putting to paper such an experience is possibly the hardest task I've faced on this trip – it will take months for it all to sink in and become clear in my mind. Years of studying the conflict from afar do not compare to a single day in this amazing and contradictory land. The suffering, humiliation and daily oppression of these proud people (of which we experienced only a minute amount) are a sad condemnation of the state of the world and international community of today.

The people here, both local and international, have been inspiring and the extent, length, and context of our long debates and late night talks have been without parallel in my life. The nature and way everyone here has a story of tragedy as a result of the oppression is unbelievable unless you've taken the decision to come here. People with bullet holes from childhood injuries, regular middle-class people with no connections to the resistance who've been subjected to the torture, both physical and mental of holding their innocent parents and best friends dying in their hands – murdered and now just another unnoticed statistic for the world to ignore.

As internationals we have received the benefits of the strongest form of resistance the Palestinian people have possessed – the will to positively continue to find and spread joy, thanks to their determination to live every day to the full: an inspiration for all.

Palestine is an extraordinary place where every day is a new adventure. I feel as though I've only scratched the surface of this land and undoubtedly this will be the first of many visits here. I only hope I and us all can repay even a small fraction of what we have received and spread the word in our respective countries about what is happening here... thank you Zajel.



Zain « Mohammed Almasri – Jordan

Nablus, my home that I was not fortunate enough to be raised in

I close my eyes, and I see the last three weeks of my life like an old silent movie before me. I see pictures of Nablus, my home that I was not fortunate enough to be raised in, among its warm infinitely struggling hills and mountains. A warm feeling imprisons me as I remember that sacred odor; Nablus's odor that will stay with me for the rest of my life, even if I am destined to leave Nablus this time.

Pictures from this great city have conquered my mind. Now I see myself standing in front of the compound Building which was completely destroyed by Israeli soldiers last week. The looks on the Palestinians faces and the unexplainable strength in their eyes, that increases as

time goes by, has always captured my heart, and formed important lessons that are not to fade, for this time dust is too heavy for wind to blow away.

I am leaving but my soul and deepest sentiments will stay with the Old City clinging to its long standing walls in the face of occupation. I am coming back, Inshallah, with the desire to make a change and help out. So this is not really a goodbye, it is just a temporary farewell to those who I truly admire and love.

Zubair Hoosen – South Africa

Many moments of laughter

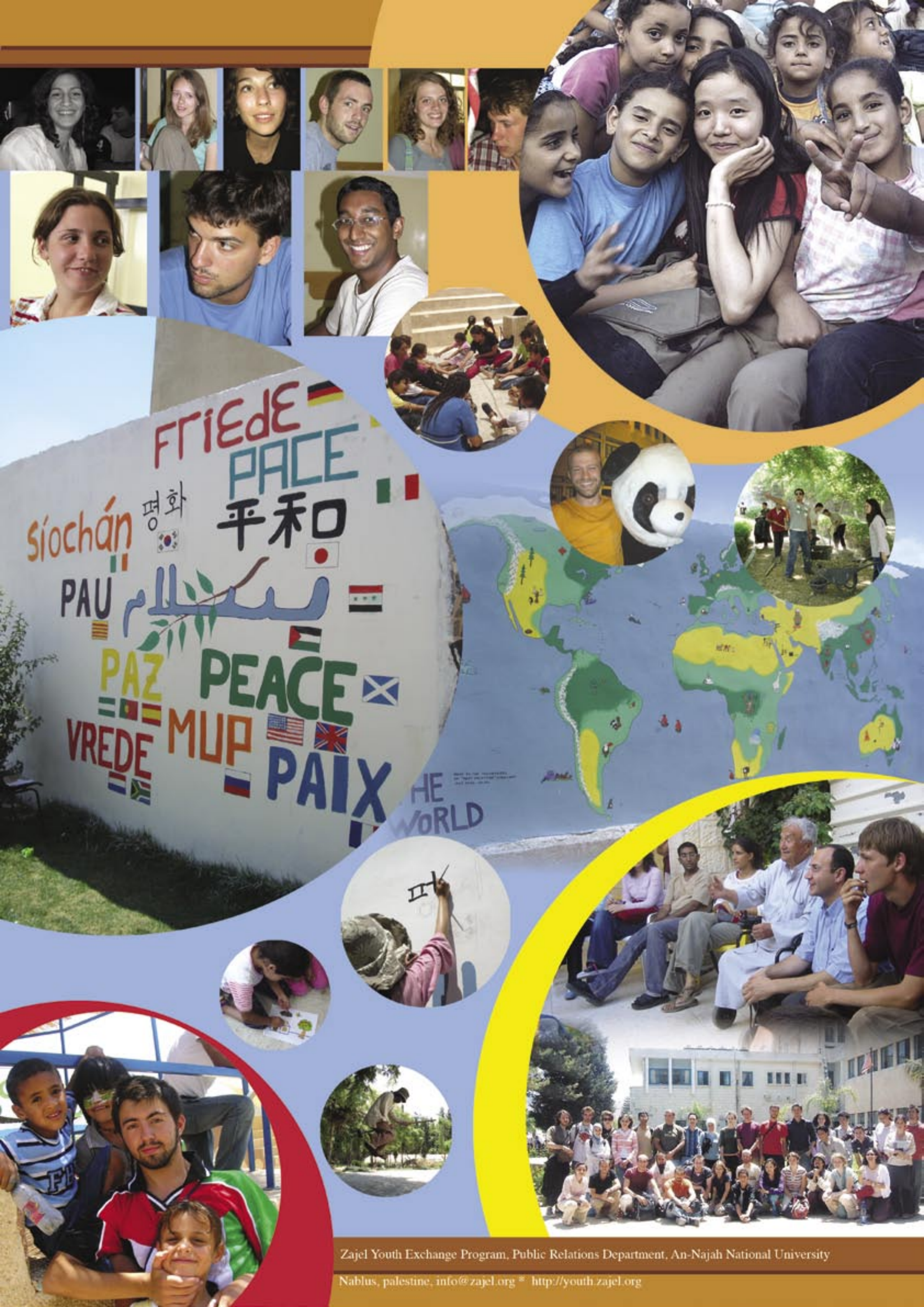
This was a very interesting experience for me. There were so many people from different countries. I enjoyed the many discussions we had between western and Palestinian Muslim

culture. There were many moments of laughter that we (local & internationals) shared, and then there were times where people told stories which brought a tear to many.

I will never forget a kid in drama class. We were playing a game where everyone was asked to close their eyes and think of a happy place. The kid, nine years old, mentioned his happy place when he will meet with his dad in

Paradise. (His father was killed by an Israeli soldier two years earlier.) This brought tears to all the volunteers that were in the class.

In the evening we were always taken to a different and exciting place. I will always remember the breathtaking views of Nablus from these rooftops. Thanks to Zajel for organizing such an interesting and informative work camp. I look forward to visiting Nablus again... soon!



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