

Reflections upon a volunteer's time at HLID

It is now February 2017 and I cannot quite believe that it is almost two years ago, when I first walked through the snow covered entrance to the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf in Salt, Jordan. Amazed at the total tranquillity that ruled within the gates of the institute, I was there for an initial meeting with Brother Andrew, concerning a potential volunteer position from early April through to the summer months, alongside intensive Arabic tuition in Amman, as part of a year abroad from university. After a very enjoyable talk and tour of the HLID in Salt, it was arranged that I should also visit over the coming days the outreach centre in Jofeh, (Bayt Saleem), by the Dead Sea. Nestled in a little village, a welcoming, vibrant and buzzing centre was beginning a new day. Teachers, volunteers and children interact, learn and play with one another to the backdrop of the building's unique indoor waterfall cooling system which acts as an effective antidote to the sometimes sweltering temperatures in the Dead Sea Valley. I was pleasantly surprised to encounter two volunteers, one from the UK and the other from Australia who were volunteering part time with the centre. They gave me a lift back home to Amman, after which I called up Brother Andrew saying that I'd be absolutely delighted to volunteer with the institute from the beginning of April.

I was soon to learn that my role was in project development. Neighbouring the HLID is an abandoned factory, the freehold of which was charitably donated to the institute by Hikma pharmaceuticals. Brother Andrew assigned me to make a project proposal document for the redevelopment of that factory into a new state of the art rehabilitation and treatment centre for disability across the Middle East. What a task! Never having been faced with such an assignment before I admit I initially felt somewhat out of my depth. However, after a few weeks of preliminary guidance and help of Brother Andrew, alongside other expert volunteers with technical and photographic skills, I began working in earnest.

Shortly after starting however, it dawned on us that there was currently nobody at the institute with rigorous training in computer architectural design programmes who had the time to draw up succinct and accurate digital architect's plans. Strangely enough, who should be sent by way of the institute within a few days? Yohanna was from South Korea and had a degree in Architecture. After spending time with the military to account for national service, he had lived in Israel volunteering with similar organisations. Eventually he found his way to the HLID where, just in time, his much needed and invaluable skills and knowledge were incorporated into this sizeable task. The Lord certainly does work in mysterious ways!

Over the months I was there, Yohanna and I worked together as a team bouncing ideas off each other and concocting a design to a building, which we hope will one day become a reality. Substantial time was spent fusing our different perspectives, interpretations and thoughts together. Moreover, we pieced together architectural expertise with knowledge of local experts in dentistry and ophthalmology, gained from external meetings in Amman and at the institute, with the skills and ideas of other members of staff and volunteers with great aptitude and experience in areas ranging from occupational therapy to mobility treatment. We eventually developed a succinct document laying out our proposal for how the neighbouring abandoned factory could be redeveloped. Frequent further meetings were held with Brother Andrew who, as well deploying his own profound knowledge of architecture and projects on scales such as this, could always add a deeper cultural insight as to how certain aspects of the factory redevelopment could be perceived. It was Brother Andrew's idea that visitors to the new centre should, where possible, be accommodated irrespective of age, as there is a far greater importance in Arab society of keeping families together. This is of course totally contrary to western thinking of the layout of hospitals, where typically there are separate wards for separate age groups. The document was finalised and

printed and from what I gather, it has helped in raising money in order to fund the construction of the new centre by the generosity of various embassies and organisations.

During early Summer Jordan's dry heat quickly dusted spring aside with the return of typical daily highs of 33 -35 degrees centigrade. Jordan's 'Yom al-Istiqlal' (Independence Day) on May 26 came around in full swing at the institute; it was a remarkable occasion. I remember being dropped off by the local bus service, as ever, at the bottom of the road which leads up to the institute, only this time to the sound of traditional celebratory Jordanian music pouring from the gates! It was a wonderful day of festivities with games for all ages, speeches from local dignitaries and an afternoon pantomime for the children. The masses were generously catered for and it truly marked the beginning of the summer and a milestone for the term time education of the institute's pupils.

Aline Hanning –Zwanenburg also visited the institute later during my time there. It was her Father in-law, Henry Hanning, who initially pointed me in the direction of the HLID. To share stories of our respective times there was delightful and I was fascinated to learn of the role the institute had played in her life. My time at the HLID came to an all too swift end in July. Home beckoned after more or less a year in Jordan. After graduating from university in the UK the following summer in 2016, I returned to Amman for a 10 day break in August, where of an afternoon I was lucky enough to return and to find this progressive, positive and pioneering institute in fine health.

I learned and gained an insight into something which I otherwise would not have done, had this opportunity not arisen. My time at the Holy Land Institute of the Deaf opened the door to some of the major cultural differences in Jordan. Disability in the Middle East is not something that is typically out in the open or spoken about. In many places, it is almost as if it is not accepted. It is however, institutes such as HLID which serve as a beacon and shine a light in a dark corner, where those with disabilities, however major or minor, are able to have equality of opportunity. Deaf and Deafblind children, by help of the HLID, can now pass their school exams and gain entrance to university; an Arabic sign language dictionary was published by the hard work of staff and volunteers there and it ought not to be forgotten that the institute is also a sanctuary to particularly vulnerable families from neighbouring Syria where sadly war and terrorism still rule. These are just a few of the remarkable qualities which make up HLID.

The doubtless dedication and persistent perseverance of volunteers and staff at the institute is humbling and extraordinary. Nowhere else have I come across such a wide range of nationalities among staff and volunteers, determined to strive for those who need help and support the most. There were those from Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Korea, Australia and the UK. I look back on my time with great fondness, and encourage and urge anyone who is passing through Jordan or neighbouring areas, to visit this very special place.

Main Entrance to the factory



Roof of the Factory



From the back entrance



Central Room Space

