



# Cycling 4Gaza

By Lina Abou Chaban



C

ycle your happiness away.

Happiness is a simple word fueled with positivity, love, and energy, yet at the same time, it's very complex. To me HAPPINESS is being Palestinian. It took me some time to realize that happiness is when my heart sparkles, my body gets goose bumps, and my spirit reaches cloud nine. Happiness is when I find my life purpose and the real reason for my existence.

I believe that I have found my answer. Happiness is being Palestinian. This might sound vague, but to me it's the entire reason for my being. My identity, heart, and soul are Palestinian, and above all, my life purpose is serving Palestine. I will simply do whatever it takes in any way, shape, or form to serve Palestine. One of the



*Cycling for Gaza in The Hague.*

shapes includes wearing pants that makes me look two times bigger, sporting a helmet that is not the most fashionable headpiece, waking up at 6:00 am, enduring a seat that partially supports me (it sure isn't the finest Italian leather), and of course, counting on luck when it comes to weather: rain or wind storms, 30-degree vs. 10-degree temperatures. Once a year I get in shape for cycling4gaza. Cycling around the world for Gaza might sound fun but it is also very painful. You see, a bicycle is the only vehicle where the passenger is the engine. If your legs get tired, you fuel them with some energy gel, ask them to shut up, and keep on pedaling. Sometimes it's a mental game. I visualize Al-Aqsa in front of me and imagine that this two-wheel-drive vehicle will eventually take my legs and me there at a speed of 27 km/hr. Sometimes we sing the path away: "Shan Gleilah," "Wein 3a Ramallah," or "3ali il Koufiyah." My personal favorite is "Shan Gleilah," which can easily take me an extra ten kilometers.

I don't get in shape on my own, actually, for what makes this experience memorable is that 40 to 50 cyclists from around the world all join cycling4gaza (C4G). The personal relationships you create with riders in those three days are a bond that only a cyclist

The stories of Palestine have accompanied me from childhood. As far as my memory goes, every Friday morning my dad would read us the newspapers and my mom would simplify the news. My grandmother would share the stories of our home in Gaza. That's when my love story with Palestine started. And later on it drove me to Cycle for Hope and Justice!



can understand. Regardless of our backgrounds, during these three days we are all one, trying to make it through six hours of cycling a day with one goal in mind: helping Gaza. The age range can go up to 60, which makes me go nuts thinking how these elders could be more fit than me, the 28-year-old. As beautifully described by one of the male cyclists (after the 2015 challenge), "During those three days I was not me; I was a half-Palestinian-half-Irish mother of four, a 14-year-old cancer survivor from the West Bank, a Welsh-Irish wife of an Israeli historian, a spirited Kashmiri from London, an American widower who dedicates his life to help Arab children, a striking Persian psychiatrist who heads the PCRF Pediatric Mental Health Project in Gaza. I was a Palestinian dentist from London, a polished Gazan entrepreneur, an MBA



Lina Abu Chaban at the end of a cycling tour.

student, a consultant, a marketeer, an Italian-speaking architect, an interior designer, a fashionista, an engineer, a financial analyst, a lawyer, an 18-year-old high school graduate volunteering in Ecuador, a German guide. My name was Mutassem, and I was the first Arab amputee to climb Kilimanjaro. I wore lipstick to the ride each morning. I was a chanter afraid of dogs, and I was born in Kisumu, Kenya. I was 14 years old and approaching my 60th year. On these three days, I was not me, I was everybody; and for these three days, and for one of the very few times of my life, I had a small glimpse of Palestine. And it was beautiful."

My journey with C4G started in 2012 in Turkey, as I cycled from Bandirma to Istanbul. This cycle commemorated my third ride from Alkmaar to The Hague in the Netherlands. It all started when an ambitious group of determined and passionate young people founded C4G in the wake of the 2009 war on Gaza. They wanted to make a difference and help, so why not combine sports, raising awareness, and collecting funds? Its mission is to raise awareness about the ongoing blockade on the Gaza Strip and to raise critical funds for carefully selected non-profit organizations that work to support Palestinians living under occupation and as refugees through education and

healthcare. Amazingly, since 2009 recruited cyclists have raised over \$1.4 million for critical medical and educational projects that have provided services to over 9,600 children.

The 2015 challenge saw 45 cyclists from around the world cycling in the Netherlands, reaching the International Criminal Court (ICC) as our final destination. This year's ride was dedicated to focusing attention on the dilemma of hundreds of thousands of children in Gaza who are suffering from mental health issues resulting from living through several wars, an ongoing siege, and living under military occupation. We are not strangers to the sad fact that if you are a six-year-old Gaza resident, you have already witnessed three wars, which leaves kids with difficult-to-quantify psychological war traumas and mental scars that are devastating and that can accompany them for a lifetime. UNICEF estimates that 373,000 children in Gaza are in desperate need of psychosocial support. We cycled to affirm that no kid deserves to have nightmares every night (the result of seeing someone killed or seriously injured, for example, or experiencing the loss of a close family member) and to fund a mental health project in Gaza. The charity partner was Palestine Children's Relief Fund (PCRF), for whom 45 cyclists raised over \$200,000 to support the newly launched Pediatric Mental Health Project in Gaza, whose goal is to assess children's needs, provide them the services they require, and train social workers in Gaza on the topic. As a team we have committed to raising \$286,000 to support the launch and running of the project for a year. To support us, visit [www.pcrf.net/cycling4gaza2015](http://www.pcrf.net/cycling4gaza2015).

Personally, I will never forget two of our cyclists, Mutassem, who flew from Gaza to join the ride, and Adham from the West Bank. I grew up hearing stories about Palestine, people's resistance, their will to live, their love for life, and their never taking "No" for an answer. I admired those traits as a kid, but these two cyclists gave them a whole new meaning. Mutassem is the first Arab Palestinian to climb Kilimanjaro and who lost his leg and a part of his hand at the age of ten when he was hit by an Israeli rocket. While we riders were pushing ourselves to pedal with two legs, Mutassem was doing the same with one real leg and a prosthesis. As for Adham, a cancer survivor who can never imagine leaving Bethlehem to try life elsewhere, home is Palestine no matter how difficult it can get. I asked how someone could be attached to a war zone. The answer? You haven't tried the olives of Palestine or set foot on its soil. Mutassem kept telling us about Gaza beach and his house that overlooks it. Our hotel at The Hague was conveniently located near the beach; he didn't think twice about going for a walk, despite the freezing weather. The Hague beach reminded him of how much he misses Gaza. And I thought to myself, "How can you miss it so much when you know that life there rests on a thin line of security?" Believe it or not, I had never met a person who had simply left Gaza for a trip and planned to return. I myself am from Gaza, and I have friends in Dubai from Gaza, but we all grew up outside Gaza. The stories you hear about life in Gaza are very different from the ones I heard from Mutassem. He spoke of its beautiful beach, people, houses, food, and weddings, but never said a word about war unless asked. Gazans living inside see it from the perspective of love and home while we living outside see it as a war zone. To Mutassem and Adham it is we who



Mutassem and Adham, the two cyclists from Gaza.

should be sad that we've never experienced what it means to play on the playgrounds of our country.

The best part of all is that if I make it to Gaza one day, I'll have a personal tour guide, and the itinerary is already set. Mutassem will take me to my neighborhood of Rimal, the beach, and of course, we will have the famous falafel of Gaza.

The ICC marked the end of the 2015 cycle but not the end of my journey of serving Palestine. After all, life is a cycle. If you stop pedaling, you will lose balance.

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To learn more, visit [www.cycling4gaza.com](http://www.cycling4gaza.com) or [www.PCRF.net](http://www.PCRF.net).

*Lina Abou Chaban is a passionate Palestinian who dreams of the day when she sets foot in Palestine. Born and raised outside Palestine and currently working in Dubai, UAE, Lina currently works as a corporate communications manager.*

*Article photos courtesy of the author.*

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*Sports for me means the gym! We have plenty of workout spaces, but we just need professionals to guide us correctly.*

**Saif Badawi, accountant**