

Dancing and Belonging



By Hasheemah Afaneh

As Hala was telling me about her journey with dancing, I couldn't help but notice that like her, tree branches were dancing with the wind around us. Hala Sweidan is a senior at Birzeit University who studies nutrition and dietetics. If you don't know her or have never seen her carry a bag with dance shoes and clothes, you would not know that she is also a contemporary dancer.

"In ninth grade, I started *dabka*, but three and a half years ago, my best friend, Sumar, took me to a contemporary dance class. I didn't know what I was doing, but after that class, I knew it was everything I wanted. With dancing, your tool is your body. That's what distinguishes a dancer from a painter who needs a brush or a writer who needs a pencil."

She started out in an intense project called "Run" by Nadia Arrouri. Since graduating from this project in 2015, Hala has become a freelance dancer, along with four others. She also dances with Sarreyat Ramallah and participated in the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival that took place in April.

"I was in two performances during the festival. One was held in the Ottoman Court in Ramallah. That was different. We had the audience involved. They followed us through rooms and doorways as we

danced. The audience wasn't just an audience anymore. They were more involved and part of the performance."

As she told me this, I could imagine the dancers holding on to the hands of audience members and taking them through the journey of a performance that they would probably never forget. Hala had such a performance stand out in her mind. It was a performance called *Serendipity*.

"For two months, we worked with children with special needs. It was emotional and hard, but it was worth it. Seeing them up on stage...it was nice to see that."

Along with children with special needs, she works with other underprivileged groups and in refugee camps such as Al-Amari and Jalazon.

"I teach dance to two very different groups. One is a group of eight- to twelve-year-old kids, and the other is a group of women. This is my favorite group because I get to see them for who they are. I have a rule in my classes: no talking about your kids or your husbands. This is your space. This is your freedom."

While her students were taking dance notes from her, she was taking a few notes from them.

"I learned courage. They're so happy. They don't have anything they ever wanted, but they're so happy and always smiling. It taught me to be grateful."

For Hala, like all who are passionate about what they do, dancing is not just dancing.



"Dancing is my safe place. It helps me love myself and my body. I wasn't confident in the beginning. It gives me confidence. It teaches me not to judge myself or others. It teaches me that it is important to love our bodies. It makes me belong."

In a world that pressures people to belong to some place or some thing, we would be lucky to find a safe place that we love and that makes us belong the way Hala found dancing.

Hasheemah Afaneh studies nutrition and dietetics at Birzeit University. Other than food and health, her passion lies in words. She writes poetry, short stories, and essays, having been published in Sixteen Minutes to Palestine, Riwayya, Cigale Literary Magazine, The Huffington Post, and others. She has been blogging for over three years at norestrictionsonwords.wordpress.com.

