



PERSONALITY OF THE MONTH

Iman Hammouri

While studying for her Bachelor degree in English Literature at Birzeit University, Iman Hammouri was quite the active student. Beyond her post as student council member, she was an avid dancer and member of El-Funoun Dance Troupe. Because of her passion for the arts, she frequently volunteered with the Popular Art Centre, and participated in organizing Palestine International Festival.

After graduating from Birzeit University, Iman accepted a job offer at an international media company, but soon after realized that her calling was to work among the local community in order to be part of the positive social change. Ms. Hammouri changed her career and was one of the first workers at the Red Crescent Society when they relocated their headquarters to Palestine from the Diaspora.

Upon completing her master's degree in social policy and planning for developing countries at the London School of Economics, Ms. Hammouri



learned that the Popular Art Centre was in dire condition and on the verge of closure. Because of her strong sense of commitment and her belief in the transformative power of culture, Iman assumed the position of director of the centre and revived it. Ms. Hammouri's decisions are frequently driven by nationalistic and altruistic motives, always with the final aim of benefitting Palestine and its culture. Under Iman's leadership, the centre continued to be revered and admired part of Palestine's thriving art scene, and following a brief hiatus, the Palestine International Festival was brought back to life and expanded to impressive proportions.

The second Intifada took its toll on the entirety of Palestinian society, but none more so than children. And because of this, one of Ms. Hammouri's early projects was the establishment of *children and youth art empowerment*

program at the centre. "Our aim was to help mitigate the psychological effect on children and youth because of the aggression they've experienced from the occupation," she explains. Soon thereafter, the centre started to expand its program beyond the Ramallah region and into many cities, villages, and refugee camps across Palestine. The small team available wanted to "give people the tools they need in order to empower themselves, and to build their communities." She has similarly made a conscious effort to promote gender equality, and advocates the use of art to change perceptions about a woman's role in society. What is admirable about this organization is not merely its accomplishments but more specifically the core principles under which it operates.

Ms. Hammouri sees culture as significant in this particular era, considering the events taking place across the Middle East. Not only in Palestine, but among other oppressed populations, culture is needed more than ever to enhance the people's resistance and attract the world's empathy. According to Hammouri, "A piece of art can change more opinions than any political speech ever could."

Iman has acted as a member on different Board of Directors for other NGOs including the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations' Network



(PNGO), and is now acting as the chair of the Board of Directors at the Palestinian Performing Arts Network. This network, among other things, attempts to pressure the government into increasing funding for the arts. "It is unreasonable that art receives a fraction of a percentage point of the total governmental budget, considering the huge impact it can have on our society." The network also aims to highlight and advocate for issues such as freedom of expression, diversity, and equality.

In discussing her commitment to the arts and the maintenance of our cultural heritage, Ms. Hammouri claims: "If we don't revive and maintain this culture, then who will? It is our utmost responsibility to keep Palestinian culture alive and pass it down from generation to generation."

Interview conducted and article written by Elias Rizek, TWIP.

