

Photographic Hospitality



By Toine van Teeffelen
and Roger Salameh

miniature portraits of common Palestinians: Humans of Palestine is a formula as simple as it is effective, the secret of which is a photo of a Palestinian or Palestinians combined with a brief or extended quote. Jointly they reveal a scene of Palestinian life. Started by Humans of New York in 2010, the initiative was subsequently adopted in many other cities and countries around the world. Among the various Palestinian initiatives especially on Facebook is one with which we are closely familiar, and which was started in the summer of 2014 by Irish and American volunteers in cooperation with the Arab Educational Institute (AEI) in Bethlehem.

Humans of Palestine (or Ramallah, Hebron, Bethlehem, Nablus...) is about photographic hospitality. In a celebration of the everyday, Palestinians are welcome to reveal a glimpse of their daily life stories. The approach is thoroughly democratic: everybody is equal, everybody is special. Photographic hospitality requires certain human skills: an openness to the unexpected and a human sensitivity to somebody's "spirit" as revealed in a usually brief encounter between the photographer/interviewer and the person(s) in focus.

In the case of Palestine there is a special dimension to the initiative. It lends value to a people who have been stereotyped and dehumanized for too long, and who have often been treated as mere sources of quotes in the service of the agendas of journalists or other visitors. In the worst cases, Palestinians have been "represented" as nameless statistics, as victims of invasions, occupation, or wars. In reaction to the overwhelming presence of such images in the international media, the persons portrayed in Humans of Palestine usually show pride in Palestinian heritage and identity despite the difficult circumstances in which they live.

Our series includes portraits of people who have perhaps never been previously approached to speak publicly about their lives: a paramedic, a seller of *falafel* or *kanafa* (a sweet pastry made with cheese), a caretaker of families in a refugee camp, a street vendor, a student with dreams... Sometimes visitors to Palestine are included and speak out about themselves and the Palestine they visit.

From an educational point of view, Humans of Palestine turns out to be helpful as well. Taking pictures and briefly interviewing each other helps students to break the ice at the beginning of a workshop. Producing photos that honor somebody's life is an educational effort par excellence. AEI recently conducted a workshop in which students were encouraged to write a "mission statement" for their lives. The students prepared by sharing with each other their dreams and communicating them through a photo/quote combination.

International volunteers and students love to be engaged as well. "Doing" Humans of Palestine is a valid excuse to start a conversation with strangers and learn about people and culture. By portraying the Palestinians with whom they work, volunteers are able to educate their friends back home. Students and scholars can give a human voice to their interviewees beyond the scope of their research, all taking part in a movement of stories that give deserved attention to Palestine's humanity.

For more information, visit <https://www.facebook.com/HumansofPalestineAEI> or <http://humansofpalestine.org>.

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"Can we wear our scarves for the photo? We are proud to be Palestinians. The scarves are a symbol of our resistance to the occupation that governs our lives."

-Nourhan and Saga, students at Bethlehem University.



"All blood is the same color. I never distinguish between people because of their nationality. For me they are all the same, and I simply want to help humans. That's why I decided to become a paramedic."

-Jamal, Bethlehem.



"Our life in the desert can be very hard. Sometimes I just feel tired. But then I remember what a beautiful gift God gave me with my family. Thank God for everything."

-Umm Ismael, Al-Rashadiyeh.



"Pink is my favorite color."

-Zeina, four years old, Bil'in.



"One time I was sleeping in my house and they knocked on our door asking for my sons. I didn't have any sons, so they went to my sister's house and took her sons."

-Badria, Nablus.



"What is the greatest secret you've heard?" "I can't tell you; it's one of the shop secrets! As a barber, you're half psychologist."

-Issa, from Ramallah.



"I fell in love, but I didn't marry her. My favorite thing about her was everything."

-Aziz, Hebron.



"I was six years old when I played right here in this spot with my friends. Israeli soldiers started to shoot at us. I was hit three times in my leg. When I woke up they told me that I had lost my leg. So I lost my leg, but soon I realized that you should simply never give up."

-Mohammed, Aida Refugee Camp.

