

PERSONALITY  
OF THE MONTH**Wasfi Kafri**

Born and raised in Atteel, a small village outside of Tulkarem, Dr. Wasfi Kafri started as a young boy whose intelligence was unmatched in his class. His family cherished their land and the fruit it bore, but like most Palestinian families, they also recognised the importance of education. As much as he loved his home village, he also loved math, physics, and chemistry. After finishing the British matriculation exam, which took place after 9th grade, he completed his education by attending Khadoury School in Tulkarem. He was one of its first graduates. Khadoury taught various subjects at the time but remained mainly an agricultural facility. So in addition to math and science, Wasfi studied a variety of farming techniques, such as cattle raising, fruit-bearing-tree planting, and many others. Today, one of his favourite pastimes is gardening. His tomatoes and arugula are testament to the tender love and care that he bestows on his plants. And despite all family efforts to hire a gardener, he insists on supervising and getting involved with every flower planted and every tree trimmed.

Dr. Wasfi received his PhD at the University of Dresden, East Germany, in electrical engineering, with a concentration in communication. After graduation he was unable to return home. During the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the remaining parts of Palestine and annexed East Jerusalem, those who were out of the country could not return. And most had to have a close family member apply for an identification card for them which served as a residency card.

Occupation, and its unreasonable maze of paperwork and excuses did not stop him. Wasfi, Mayya, and their first-born daughter returned to Palestine. Wasfi immediately got busy. He, along with a group of young scientists and academics at the time, led by the notable Zuhair Al Karmi, founded the College of Science/Al Quds University in Abu Dis, currently known as Al Quds University. Israeli forces refused to allow the institution to be called Al Quds University at the time and closed down the college. Faculty members were arrested, and Wasfi was deported on the spot because he did not yet have his ID card. A few years later Wasfi, Mayya – who was pregnant at the time with their second child, Mohannad – and their daughter returned again to Palestine. He went to work at Al Najah University in Nablus. He left every morning at 6:00 a.m. and returned late at night. He taught physics, math, and engineering courses. When his papers finally came through, he acquired an ID and the right to reside in his country.

Wasfi's final career move was to Birzeit University, where he has spent the past thirty-plus years. He is a founding faculty member of the school of engineering, and he built the electrical engineering programme with his colleagues. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that Birzeit's school of engineering is an excellent one. At Birzeit, he found what every professor looks for: the ability to be a teacher and a leader at the same time. During

the first Intifada, the Israeli occupation authorities shut down the university. Faculty members taught at home and in small apartments in defiance of the illegal closure of their institution. Israeli forces raided these apartments and detained professors and students who were obviously in class. Dr. Wasfi Kafri and his students were no exception. If anything, this is an example of what it takes to be a Palestinian academic.

Today, at 80 years old, Dr. Wasfi Kafri continues to teach part-time at Birzeit University. He is still as engaging as he was thirty years ago, and he continues to challenge his students. And like all good professors, he not only teaches engineering courses or instils scientific knowledge, he also teaches about life. Along with science he communicates great humanity and humility. His research career is just as impressive. In 1994 he spent a year in research at the University of Maryland as a Fulbright scholar.

Dr Kafri's career is a story of perseverance, dedication to one's country, and the education of the younger generation. His sacrifices – both professionally and personally, in the hopes of raising an enlightened future generation for Palestine – are representative of all Palestinian academics who often go unrecognised. Not only did he influence many generations, he also raised three children who have a passion for knowledge. His success is not an individual one. His wife, Mayya, who is also an educator, provided support both professionally and personally. She recently retired from a long career in education herself. Two of his children hold PhDs and have chosen careers in academia. And his youngest holds a master's degree in digital media and works at the BBC Action programme. When asked what their dad taught them, all three will tell you that he taught them to love knowledge and pursue it everywhere. They hope that some day he will pass this on to their children too.

