

## PERSONALITY OF THE MONTH

### Dalal Al-Taji



Dalal Al-Taji was found amongst rubble following a bombing raid on a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon in the late 1970s. A small child, she was taken to the local clinic of the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) where it was found that she had been totally blind since birth. Because her family was assumed to have been killed, Dalal was taken to the PRCS children's hospital, adjacent to Acre Hospital in Beirut, which became her home, together with another orphaned child, Hamoudi, who was severely disabled with cerebral palsy.

In January 1981, I met Dalal who seemed to be about 5 or 6 years old. She was obviously a bright child and had acquired some English skills (being proficient in Arabic) from listening to international visitors to the PRCS facilities. However, Dalal was delayed in self-help skills because for a long time, there had been no one available to teach her. Dalal had just begun

to spend her weeks at a school for blind children in Beirut that was conducted by an international organization and provided residential accommodation during the week; she returned to the hospital during weekends. A family from South Africa was responsible for the school, and one of their daughters was Dalal's teacher. They were very caring people and gave special attention to Dalal, also working on her self-help skills.

Schooling was on hold in late 1982 during the Israeli invasion of Beirut and the subsequent massacre at Sabra and Shatila. During the war, Dalal and four children who were wheelchair users (among them Hamoudi), were transferred four times to different locations, seeking safety. At the time of the massacre, we were all located in the PRCS Acre Hospital, which is located opposite Shatila Camp. Men participating in the massacre came into the hospital and

took some people away as they kept us at gunpoint. The International Red Cross was eventually able to enter the hospital grounds and take the children, myself, and some other people to safety.

But this was not the end of Dalal's difficulties; the situation remained unsettled, and all foreign volunteers had to leave as they were being refused visas. My departure was a little "messy." I had an official work permit, but when I attempted to renew my visa, I was held in custody and forced to leave the country within three days.

I continued my work with PRCS in Cairo. Assisted by the Australian Embassy and Save the Children UK, PRCS made great efforts to have Dalal and Hamoudi transferred from Beirut to Cairo where I had started a PRCS Rehabilitation Centre in the Ain Shams area. It took more than a year before the necessary travel documents for Dalal and Hamoudi were completed. During this time, the Acre Hospital, where the children were living, came under attack and people were killed and wounded. Hamoudi was seriously wounded. Dalal was not injured but was covered with blood and dust. She experienced a great shock and could not walk for about a week. She still suffers from flashbacks. Because the Beirut airport was closed, their travel required a boat journey to Cyprus and then a plane to Cairo – and upon arrival, although all necessary entry papers had been completed, they were delayed for another sixteen hours at the airport.

As Dalal lived in a special PRCS apartment adjacent to the Rehabilitation Centre, the next twelve years in Cairo proved a good period for her. She attended a school for blind girls and made many friends with whom she is still in contact. She excelled in her schoolwork, had the opportunity to develop her interest in music (playing flute and piano, and singing in a choir), and obtained a good grade in the public examinations at the end of secondary school.

In October 1995, Dalal, Hamoudi, another PRCS child, and some staff members from the center in Cairo moved to Khan

Younis in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. The PRCS has a branch there, and a small rehabilitation center had been started. An apartment near the new building, still under construction, had been prepared for our arrival. While most universities in the Gaza Strip had commenced the new academic year, Al Azhar University was experiencing delays, and Dalal was able to enter the baccalaureate degree program in English literature. Initially, this was problematic because she was the first blind student to be enrolled at the university and the department preferred that she go into some other specialty. Dalal, however, persisted, and although she faced a number of problems in the first few years, she quickly acquired a strong group of friends and gained great respect from her lecturers. Dalal has a keen interest in languages, and in addition to her excellent command of both Arabic and English, she speaks and writes French well and knows some Hebrew.

On completion of her BA in English literature, Dalal was employed as a translator at the PRCS Khan Younis Center. In 2003–2004 Dalal, through a Ford Foundation scholarship, studied at Edinburgh University, Scotland, and completed a master's degree in social anthropology. Since 2005, Dalal has been head of the Continuing Education Department at the University College of Ability Development of the PRCS. She organizes courses, lectures in the BA degree program on policy of inclusion, rights, and legislation, and Braille, and is involved in various activities, translation, and committee work for the college. She has travelled to several countries and participated in a number of conferences and projects.

Dalal would like to study for a PhD but has not, as yet, found a scholarship that would support such an undertaking. In the meantime, both within the college and within the community at large, Dalal continues to make a significant contribution.

Jean E. Calder\*

\* For further information on Ms. Calder, read Ruth Pollard's article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* at <http://www.smh.com.au/world/jean-calder-act-of-love-amid-gazas-war-20131122-2y11w.html>.