

The Hope Fund, an Organization That Lives up to Its Name

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Seated at table (l-r): Fahim Qubain, Karim Anchassi, Ahmad El Achwah, Reem Zeidan and Helen Qubain. Standing (l-r): Pam Bailey, Mahmoud Thaher, Nisreen Zaquot, Minna Al-Barqi, Caroline Katba, Ibrahim Abu Nada, Samer Anabtawi, Nancy Qubain and Rayyan Yassin. (Staff photo A. Begley)

As tensions between Israel, Egypt and Palestine erupted into violence in Gaza and along the Egyptian border on Aug. 18, thousands of miles away in Washington, DC 35 Palestinian college students were waiting to end the day's Ramadan fasting with an iftar dinner at Busboys and Poets. They spoke enthusiastically about their studies and future plans, and if they were worried about their families in Palestine they did not reveal it. Long accustomed to facing violence with a brave front, these students were now anticipating an experience shared by their American counterparts: the first week of school.

Every year for the past decade, the Hope Fund has provided the best and brightest young Palestinians, many of them refugees, who otherwise could not afford higher

education, with full scholarships to an American college. In 2001, Dr. Fahim Qubain and his wife, Nancy, launched the Hope Fund by securing full scholarships to Roanoke College in Virginia for two Palestinian students. The students would go on to graduate *cum laude*, earning degrees in physics, math and biochemistry—setting the a very high standard for future Hope Fund students!

The Qubains and 10 of this year's 35 Hope Fund students (a few had not yet arrived in the U.S. because of visa issues) visited the *Washington Report* offices on Aug. 17. The new and returning Palestinian students will be attending such higher institutions as Georgetown University, Amherst College and Illinois College. The college or university provides each student a full scholarship, for a total this year of \$2.1 million. The Hope Fund covers all other costs, including visas, transportation, textbooks, and even clothing.

We at the *Washington Report* are not the only ones to be impressed by the Hope Fund students; they are sought by many Ivy League schools as well. This year, executive director Helen Qubain said, 12 college scholarship had to be turned down because there were not enough qualified candidates. This is due primarily to the fact that many high-achieving Palestinian students don't have the opportunity to practice their English enough to get the high scores they need on standardized tests. The Fund hopes that one way to solve this problem is by asking volunteers and mentors to Skype with prospective students to help improve their English skills.

As an indication of the impressive level of accomplishment of Hope Fund participants, of this year's 19 returning students at least seven have made the Dean's List consistently; almost all are club leaders, have outside internships or are involved in a volunteer group; at least four have outside jobs to help finance their education; two are involved in sports; one is a fraternity member; and one is pursuing a quadruple major. The numerous awards and honors come as no surprise to anyone who has met and spoken with these future leaders. They are young, hungry, smart, educated—and ready to take on the world.

Taking on the world is an expensive endeavor, however. Although some students have been able to raise enough money on their own to cover their non-tuition expenses, this year the Hope Fund will pay at least \$90,000 to cover expenses for incoming freshmen—in addition to at least \$46,000 that it will pay for the returning

students. That \$136,000, however, represents an investment in the future, in students who otherwise would have much fewer prospects.

Hope Fund participants come from low-income families in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Many have siblings whom their parents struggle to support. All have worked hard to reach the top of their high school class and passed rigorous testing to be accepted into the Hope Fund program, which partners with fellow educational non-profit Amideast to help find the most qualified candidates. One student even taught himself English in an effort to improve his chances.

These students do not always have the opportunity to study physics, biomedical engineering, business, computer science, economics, and political science in their own country. After completing their education in the U.S., Hope Fund students—many of whom go on to pursue a master's or Ph.D.—are required to return home so that the skills and experience they have gained can be put to use in places like Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Gaza.

Aside from gaining a top education at an American university, the Hope Fund students realize that they also have another important role—as ambassador for their country and their culture. Some said they had been warned of the ignorance of American students. "They aren't ignorant, as they say," opined 18-year-old Caroline Katba, who will be a freshman at Amhurst, "they just don't have the resources." When she attended high school for a year in the United States, Katba found herself welcomed with a smile by students in Tennessee. It was "kinda strange," she recalled with a laugh.

Samer Anabtawi, a standout quadruple-major senior at Illinois College who started the first Amnesty International chapter at his school, also understands the importance of being an ambassador. "What I learned from the Hope Fund is resilience," he said. "The key is empowering people."

Empowering Americans and Arabs alike with knowledge is the first step in bridging the gap between the two communities—something that the Hope Fund students are doing with enthusiasm, intelligence and élan.

For more information about the Hope Fund, visit <www.thehopefund.org>.