

Dear All

My visit to Palestine was brilliant! I was so excited by what I saw and feel the work BSST is doing is so appropriate and right. I felt truly validated and came away with warmth in my heart having met so many wonderful people doing such good work in appalling circumstances. Our money really does go a long way! I had chosen a broad variety of projects to visit.

Bustan Qaraaqa

The first was this environmental project in Beit Sahour, Bethlehem. It is run by 2 English environmentalists who also do a day a week teaching at Birzeit University. It is an experimental farm, exploring methods of water capture and use. They grow trees from locally gathered seeds and help in tree planting, together with the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture. The house they share with volunteers from all sorts of countries is totally “green” with compost toilets, use of grey water and clever use of all waste (eg building walls from wine bottles reclaimed from local wine bar) . They are activists helping local farmers resist settlers trying to take over their land by planting trees and they are educationalists teaching parties of schoolchildren about the environment. This is done through a Jerusalem-based organization, Juzoor.



Unfortunately I didn't meet any Palestinians there (except the next door neighbour) and although the place had a bit of a hippy feel, they certainly work very hard and live on a very low budget. The volunteers pay a guest house charge, which makes the guest house self-sustaining and there are some profits from the school groups.

Shiraa

In the Deheishe Refugee Camp I was treated royally by Hussein Al-Hroub, the Manager Director, who first showed me round the camp in Bethlehem where 15,000 people live in 1 sq km, with 87% unemployment.. I had been met on the Bethlehem side of the horrendously brutal checkpoint from Jerusalem by Rosie Watt, the lovely English volunteer who has been our contact person. I was then taken home by Hussein where a feast greeted me. I met his lovely family and also one of the women who had benefited from the sewing project. I didn't see the sewing project in action but was given gifts! I also saw the bank of new sewing machines donated from a European donor. I then saw the Computer Skills programme in action – 15 students, men and women, some in employment and others not, working together with a tutor from Birzeit University –all overheads met by the BSST donation. What was wonderful was the immense pride, enthusiasm and keenness demonstrated by the students.



Villages Group



I spent an amazing day with the Villages Group in the South Hebron Hills, first visiting upper and lower Umm El Kheir, where the nursery classes are. My most enduring memory of the day was sitting with the 2 teachers, Naamah and her sister Sarah, their children and their mother, Malikha. What is especially amazing about this family, is that the mother, an illiterate widow, had put these 2 daughters not just through school but through Hebron University! The young women were using a laptop, powered by the wind turbine and solar panels which BSST had helped fund. The nursery is thriving, and Sarah, who gave up because of her recent pregnancy, now wants to restart her school. It is in this village that the famous toilet built by Ezra is situated. The Karmel settlement abuts this village and the settlers have erected a huge chicken-rearing shed in the



middle of the village.



In lower Umm El Kheir, we met Tagrid, the teacher in the learning enrichment programme. Tagrid has made links with the Principal at the local school, who reports improved attendance and attainment of the children who have been attending Tagrid's classes.

We moved on to the Cave dwellers' village, where we met Ali, a graduate (but not trained teacher) who runs the learning enrichment programme there. Families vary in their acceptance of the programme, but while we were visiting a family where the father is somewhat negative, the children suddenly jumped up, grabbed their books and ran off. John followed them and found them interested and engaged in the



class.



We moved on to Susiya and met Nasser, who drives the Children's



Transportation vehicle.



Nasser's family had been evicted from their home because of an archaeological dig in the village of Susiya. B'Tselem are involved in a photography project here and photographed Nasser returning to the site of their home with his father. They paid their entrance fee and filmed for 15 mins before being ejected by the IDF. The film was recently shown at the Berlin Film festival, with Nasser attending.

Susiya has much more diverse activities than the other villages, with mixed agriculture and tree planting (almonds as well as olives), duck and rabbit rearing, as well as chickens, and an active creative activities centre. There is a shop selling embroidery and other products. There is also a Polish-financed milk product centre, powered by solar panels, inspired by the renewable energy project (wind turbine and solar panels) set up by the Villages Group.

The final visit was to **Emek Shaveh**. The director, Yonathan Mizrachi, took us round the City of David archaeological site – now a major Israeli tourist site, well-landscaped and signposted and overlooking the poverty-stricken Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan, with the site actually being in that neighbourhood. Emek Shaveh is trying to persuade authorities not to allow archaeology to legitimise claims over land. ES's philosophy is that archaeology is not just related to what is found in digs, but should relate to what is currently in existence. They maintain that this land has always been multicultural. What I hadn't realised before is the close links between Emek Shaveh and the community of **Silwan**. We visited the community centre and saw the library, computers, the music room and meeting rooms. Outside, by the refuse dump, was a well fortified and guarded settler house.



All in all, I felt totally affirmed in what we in BSST are doing, to support some wonderful people, Israelis and Palestinians in the community building projects they are undertaking under hostile and difficult circumstances.