

Travelogue of the summer of 2023

It's been a while since we made a travel report. Sometimes the visits to Gaza are so intense that we don't find the right energy to write after having returned. But at the same time loads of amazing things are always happening there which we are so happy to share with you.

Last summer Suzanne stayed in Gaza for one month to visit all HOPE supported projects and summer camps. Ingrid joined the last week with three other Dutch visitors for a literature project we've started. Visual artists Rob Voerman also joined the trip to plan a project he wants to realise in Gaza.

It was a great trip and filled with positive energy we are happy to share it with you!



GAZA IN GENERAL

For some years the U.N. had been warning that Gaza would become uninhabitable for humans. We've seen the situation getting worse and worse each year, but what happens when a place with 2.5 million people becomes uninhabitable? Certainly, all people won't suddenly die or disappear. So, then what?

Now, two years after the expected time of becoming uninhabitable, we can clearly see the real meaning of this declaration on Gaza. The people are still there, eating, sleeping. Those who have jobs go to work, but more and more we hear the saying "We don't feel alive anymore".

The situation has become so dehumanised that all you can do is go through the motions without thinking too much. Many adults, teenagers and even children lack the motivation to even try something, because they are mentally exhausted or solely because they lost the believe in a better future or in any actions by means of which they can change their situation.

In practice, life is hard in Gaza, yes, but the feeling of being a forgotten laboratory-mouse stuck in a cage might be what is most damaging to the people, the culture and development of the strip.



It takes a lot of creative thinking, imagination, and mindpower to keep yourself on the go in such a paralysed community. Luckily, this creative thinking, imagination, and mind power are exactly what we have to offer and what we find in all the amazing Gazan people who we are working with. Each one of them is an “Art-Marine” who keeps going and trying new things, no matter what goes on around them.

This report is not a story of the success of the HOPE Foundation, but the story of local artists, teachers and community-builders who somehow keep turning rubble into greatness, time and time again.

OPEN STUDIO

After almost 30 years there are a lot of changes going on in the Open Studio. The building is being renovated and they are becoming part of another department within the PRCS. The result is a bit of a chaotic summer, but great aspirations for the future.

With more physical space for the arts we hope to serve even more children in the coming years and start more collaborations with artists in all disciplines.

Moving the team from the rehabilitation department to the psychosocial departments presents options of learning and developing and putting more focus on the psychological and social side of the arts. We are excited!



To make a great summer camp in the midst of all these changes, the team decided to include loads of trips and outside projects. The theme of the camp was “Nature and climate change” and the children dived into land art, learned about plants and farming, cleaned the beach and visited gardens.

The team made a great effort and about 600 children participated in the summer camp activities.

We found ourselves lucky to be there just in time to ask social media studio “MediaLivePro” to make a promo of the open studio before the rooms were torn down for renovation.

Feeling like joining a two minute party?... watch the video here: <https://bit.ly/3Px8htX>

THE ACADEMY

We are incredibly proud of the Academy! In only 2.5 years they went from seven kids in a living room on Saturday to the first fully functioning art space in Khan Yunis (city in the south of Gaza). Around 70+ kids are taking part in weekly summer activities all based on multidisciplinary arts. A large group of local artists know the place well and pass by regularly and about 15 of them are actively teaching, helping out or are in other ways connected to the activities. They are strongly and positively connected with their surrounding community. They made an exhibition mixing children’s art and professional arts that pulled an audience of 300 people, they were in the news over ten times.

This summer they created an arts-summer camp on climate change and a Mothers and Daughters summer camp. In this camp, mothers and daughters together were introduced to arts, mental health support, and women and children's rights. It might be hard to imagine, but as a result of this camp, some mothers realised for the first time that they could have quality conversations with their daughters that went well beyond discussing what we will have for dinner. Their bonds and family structure were changed for life.



Meanwhile in the academy, Suzanne also gave a workshop to a group of university art students who are very good at drawing but have zero training in conceptual thinking. The fear in their eyes on the first day was replaced by free and open laughter on the last day while they were presenting the craziest ideas without feeling judged or limited in their thinking.

A group of young teens made mixed media artworks for an exhibition in Brussels celebrating arts and young culture from Palestine. They were asked about something they dream of doing and the answers were skateboarding, surfing, reading in nature and simply being a fairy or a princess. All of their dreams were accompanied by K-pop soundtracks as is the case in any high school in the world right now.

The only one not caught by the K-pop Fever was Ali (17 years old). He started in the Open Studio as a little boy, never stopped drawing and painting, hardly missed any activity in the academy and this summer started as a teacher with his first beginners drawing class. What amazing developments there were in that little space in Khan Yunis.

We say it again... We are proud!

SOCIAL MEDIA CLUB

Another project that has blown us away with its development is the Social Media Club. After two years of summer camps teaching young teens how to make and share art on social media, photographer Mohammed Shurrab and Media company MediaLivePro, asked us to make the project a year-round program. They got a group of the most motivated kids and brought in multiple artists who are doing well on the socials. Not only did they learn many new techniques, they also learned creative thinking and taking responsibility. After six months the teens were going round the office and studios as if they were working there. Focused, driven, respectful and with a pleasant confidence. The adults were just there for support and the kids came up with new ideas. Their parents expressed a great interest in the attitudes of their children since they were part of the project.



As an extra challenge we asked three kids to make some introduction videos for our BeeHome Academy project. www.beehomeacademy.com They proceeded from idea development until the final editing. Honestly, I started out sceptical, but look what they did!

<https://bit.ly/3PRA1uX>

<https://bit.ly/3LAZO83>

The Social Media Summer camp of this year was as successful as the other years and brought in a new group of children for the next semester of the club. All these kids increasingly felt empowered because they were developing a strong voice that can reach far outside the limitations of Gaza.

BREAK DANCE ACADEMY

Like the Open Studio, The Breakdance Academy has also been a bit slow because of rebuilding. Their space had become too small for the number of kids, so they invested in a new and bigger space. Renovations took longer than expected, which meant the summer camp didn't have its usual glory. But the new space is ready now and we already see pictures coming in of large groups of kids doing games, sports and somersaults.

Another new feature of the Breakdance Academy is that it started Taekwondo for boys and girls. It is a great way for children to learn about balance, self-defence and how to use physical training to deal with their emotions. For as far as we know Myuz is the only one in Gaza who is offering this sport to girls. By letting his own daughters participate in the classes he is showing the other families that it is okay for them to also send in their daughters.



MORE SUMMER CAMPS

Besides the summer camps from the year-round-HOPE-supported-spaces we also supported a number of other summer camps this year.



The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music organised an amazing summer project following last year's great success. It brought together 100 children, in the ages of 7 to 14, of whom half with disability and half without disability. The children spent three weeks making different kinds of music together, as well as doing theatre, dancing, drawing, and many other activities. The goal of this summer camp was to achieve the true inclusion of children with disabilities.

By making these two groups of children enjoy activities together they truly got to know and care about each other. Loads of fears and prejudices melted away from both sides and kids just became kids. And what a great party it was to be in a building where 100 kids are trying out different instruments!



Art centre Shababeek for Contemporary Art produced its fourth summer camp with HOPE this year. As always they target a group of youngsters between 14 and 18. These kids are considered to be too old for the kids activities and too young for the adult ones. Shababeek is taking them in and giving them a training in three different art techniques over a period of three weeks. This year they taught painting, printing and mosaic.

New this year is that they also worked with a group of deaf children. They really were amazed by their commitment and abilities. By the end of the summer camp they mentioned regretting not including them in the same activities with the other participants and they are already looking forward to organise a fully inclusive summer camp next year.



The summer had already started when we heard from Mr. Karam Al Saadoni. He is the founder of The **American Language Center** in Khan Yunis. He is also our trusted English and Arabic teacher and constantly helps us out with translations. He annually organises a small, but very effective summer camp during which 30 really young kids are immersed into the English language through three weeks of games, crafts, theatre and music. This year he didn't receive the usual funds, so we stepped in and then got to see the cutest little boys and girls being totally proud because they spelled out the word "cat" in playdough. It was such a joy to witness this and to see what enthusiasm the kids developed for the language.

Since speaking English is less and less common in Khan Yunis, but more and more needed in a global online world, we think this camp could be a very important first step in the development of these kids.

LITERATURE PROJECT

Having worked in Gaza for more than 30 years, means witnessing the fact that over the years the situation has deteriorated year by year on all conceivable and unthinkable levels. The United Nations, the International Court in The Hague and the most diverse nongovernmental organizations, including HOPE have tried many ways to improve the situation in Gaza but until now... No justice!

We wondered what had been left out? What had we overlooked?

We realized it was creative writing and literature.

After being in Gaza during the violent escalation in summer 2022, we heard many small, personal stories from the victims that really hit home. Stories that were relatable not only to those already connected to the topic but to anyone. We realised that a powerful way to

make a large group of people truly understand what it is to live under occupation would be to share new novels from Gaza with a wider public.

With this thought in mind Ingrid went on the road. First, she approached Ton van de Langkruis, founder of International writers' festival "Writers Unlimited". He introduced Jurgen Maas and Djûke Poppinga to Ingrid. Jurgen Maas Publishers is a publishing house in Amsterdam. Areas of interest are the Middle East, North Africa and the multicultural society. Jurgen studied journalism and political science. He worked for almost fifteen years at Dutch channel IKON as radio maker and presenter. Djûke Poppinga is specialized in modern Arabic literature and it is her objective to provide the information that publishers and other cultural institutions need, to make the right choices as far as translations are concerned. Djûke translated over 30 books and teaches Arabic literature. Jurgen and Djûke became the Dutch committee. Then Mr. Karam was asked to arrange a Gazan committee of intellectuals with experience in the literature field. The Gaza committee received thirteen novels, written in Gaza and published only in Arabic. After reading them all, they presented a selection of five books to the Dutch committee. The most suitable one of these five will be translated to Dutch and published on the Dutch market. If the novel is a success, we will look into which other languages the book can be translated and marketed. This project has a duration of five years. It is our intention to publish at least five books.

Djûke, Ton, Ingrid and Suzanne travelled in Gaza and the West Bank to discuss the selection of the novels and to meet the writers. We visited many people and organisations related to literature. It was a great exploration, even for Ingrid and Suzanne who know Gaza but are normally moving in the field of the arts. We were amazed by what we saw and heard, and we were touched by the quality of the stories told and the poetry and music night which took place in a gallery in Raffah, a very torn up area in the far south of Gaza.



It truly was a great adventure to be in Gaza with a group of Dutch people of which two came along for the first time. Both Ton and Djûke were astonished! Not only by the poverty, hardship and challenges they encountered but even more by the vitality, joy, humour, kinship and high level of arts and thinking they met there. Both of them realised that their expectations of Gaza had been very coloured by the news and that, however hard you try, you can't really know Gaza without ever having been there.

As all Gazans working in the projects mentioned in this report would tell you;

“Ahlan wa Sahlan, Welcome to Gaza!”

