

I am writing this after one year from when I took my trip to Palestine to volunteer in Human Rights with the Excellence Center. I had already volunteered in the West Bank with the same organization in 2022. On my previous trip I volunteered in children's education.

I didn't have anything prepared, I booked the flight the same day and had my mom drive me to JFK airport. I wasn't sure what came over me. Something told me I had to be there. This was during the Gaza invasion. I felt afraid to go, but I was sick staying home. I had no other option. This time I didn't fly into Ben Gurion. I didn't have a good experience in the past flying through that airport or with the Israeli's. This time I was going to fly into Jordan, cross through the border to get into Jerico. It was a longer and possibly riskier way, but I didn't want to support Isreal in anyway. Not their airport, their taxi, or their statistics of tourists entering Tel Aviv.

I had never studied law or international human rights. I was looking to go and see how I can advocate or use myself in a way that would help the Palestinian cause. Unfortunately, I didn't find that. It was a learning experience, but I didn't get to contribute anything to Palestine.

Because I am writing this over a year later, I would like to just speak on some of the experiences I had, that I can still remember today. Every day with the center we would visit a new family. We would learn about their experience living under the illegal Israeli occupation. We visited this one woman and met her daughters that lived in Hebron. We needed to go through an Israeli check point to get into the city. Our organizer was denied entry; we had to find the way ourselves and eventually found the daughter that led us the rest of the way. Her mother told us the story about how the Israeli military through tear gas cans at the local Palestinians that suffocated her husband to death. He left behind his wife and daughters. I think about them every so often wondering who will protect and provide for them. The city they lived in was being taken over by the illegal Israeli settlers. She was an amazing artist; she enjoyed painting and had her work all around the house. I bought a tote from her that had her artwork on it.

When we weren't visiting families and businesses, the volunteers spent time in different coffee shops. I enjoyed spending time with the local Palestinians. Especially the kids, they had a great sense of humor and could entertain you for a long time with their questions. One of my favorite memories was seeing the kids outside playing with kites. Something so simple kept them entertained and smiling for so long.

I volunteered in the Fawwar Refugee camp teaching English to the children. The first time I went, we visited a family to get used to the way there. Local Palestinians didn't like going to Fawwar camp, they felt it was too dangerous for them. across from the bus stop that

dropped us off, you can see an Israeli post. They had a tower where they watched over the Palestinians. It was another trip that we as volunteers had to navigate through an unfamiliar place due to the Israeli occupation. On our way to meet the family, there was a young boy about the age of 13 walking beside us. He was pulling this metal cart with a box on it. The Palestinian sun was so hot, it aggravated my skin. Just breathing caused me to sweat. This was in the month of July, mid summer. I grabbed the one handle and tried to help him carry it. He kept saying no no. I didn't listen. I didn't know where this young boy was going but it was very hot for him to be lugging this box alone. We walked for a short time and then he ran off. I had no idea where he was going. The group was walking ahead of me, and I was trying to keep up but didn't want to just leave his box. So, I kept walking without him. I could hear the sounds of running and looked behind me. It was the boy, but he came back with this slushy juice pouch that we could both drink with just one hand while we were pulling the cart with the other. I was very surprised by his generosity. He is just a young boy; how does he understand hospitality. A simple thank you would have been enough for me; he didn't even have to give me that. This is a memory I could never forget. It just speaks to how Palestinians are very hospitable, welcoming, thankful people.

We arrived; the family we met still had the key to their original house that was stolen from them by the settlers. The mother told us a story about giving birth to her son in a car after she tried going to the hospital and the Israelis didn't grant permission for her to go. The son she gave birth to was now about 24 years old. He walked us back to the bus station and made sure we got there safely.

We were told that when the boy was going back home an IDF soldier stopped him, took money from him, and hit him a few times.

I went back with a volunteer named Louisa; she was from Australia. We did origami with the kids. There wasn't too much we could do. There wasn't a school with desks. We were outside in this small area. The kids looked like they enjoyed the origami and seemed like they never did it before. I have this memory that I love of when we would be walking over to the school, the kids would shout Sahna!! Louisa!!!

I remember the day we went to a place called Masafer Yatta. I don't even know how to explain how the Palestinians live there. They didn't live in homes. It was more like broken down trailer looking homes, everything looked destroyed. From where we were, we could see the Israeli village next door and could see the electrical wiring that the Palestinians didn't have access too. The man told us about how settlers come in the night to steal their stock and destroyed their homes and belongings. He spoke about how they would unleash their dogs to attack the Palestinian kids on their way to school. All the kids there were barefoot, surrounded by flies. I met his son. He was adorable, he wore a little thobe and

was also barefoot. He allowed me to pick him up for a moment. I was happy to feel like I won over his trust. I looked at him in the eyes smiling but saw something. It was like he communicated to me through his eyes. They were full of despair. Just sadness. It took the smile right off of my face. A child, maybe the age of 3 years old, but so aware of his surroundings and wanting to be treated with decency. I remember his father saying, all we want is to be treated like human beings. We don't want money or anything else, just to be treated in the way you guys are treated. He would be killed a year later by an Israeli settler. The Israeli murderer didn't face any time. The Israelis refused to give his body back to his family, where he left behind children and his wife. There was something about that place, it was filled with so much sorrow. I wanted to come back. But what would I do, what could I do?

After that day I went to the city Nablus. I always wanted to visit this city. It was a city that I felt like I always heard on the news. The volunteer named Alex was sick the morning of, so we didn't get to leave until much later and the drive was about 3-4 hours. We visited this mountain where you can overlook and see most of Nablus. The breeze and views were amazing. These locals told us a little about the city but were interrupted by the sounds of fireworks. Except there were no fireworks. There was some bombing that started, and we were told that the Israeli's were going to enter Nablus. We rushed back to our hostels. I felt afraid to sit in my room. The volunteers and the local Palestinian that worked with the center that brought us to Nablus all joined and sat on the roof. All night we heard gun shots and bombs exploding. The one local described it as a typical night.

I spent three weeks during my stay in the West Bank. I got to see beautiful things, learn history, and the way of life for a Palestinian. I felt my trip ended too soon. There was so much to learn and see, I didn't feel I accomplished anything. Of course, this couldn't and wouldn't be my last time visiting Palestine.