

## NGO organizes health festival for Palestinian children



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BEIRUT: Children at a Palestinian school in Bar Elias were treated to live theater and educational games over the weekend at a health festival organized by Children of Al-Jaleel Center together with American Near East Refugee Aid, a regional NGO. The day of activities was arranged for the children to promote healthy eating and exercise as part of ANERA's "Creative Health Campaign," and the children were also taught about the dangers of smoking.

"The campaign is about simple, smart and cost-effective practices that people - particularly those in poor and marginalized communities - can do by themselves to protect their health, achieve economic benefits and foster self-reliance," said May Haddad, community health adviser for ANERA.

"These kids are really subjected to bad eating habits, they eat lots of junk food. We estimate 54 percent of the adult population are smokers, it's most likely worse in poor communities, and this affects the children directly. There has been no serious effort to combat this, which makes this type of event so important."

Bar Elias and the surrounding area has a very large Palestinian community; it does not, however, have official status as a refugee camp, and is therefore ineligible or inaccessible to some funding and many NGOs. The Al-Ramieh School in Bar Elias provides schooling for 350 pupils. "These children come from very deprived communities, in many ways they get less support than those in the refugee camps," said Haddad.

Hossein Shahidi, a voluntary adviser to Haddad from the Lebanese American University, explained that "many Palestinians living in Bar Elias are refugees who arrived following the creation of Israel in 1948. Others have come from Palestinian refugee camps elsewhere in Lebanon that were destroyed as a result of fighting there: in Beirut, during the Civil War; in south Lebanon, following Israeli invasions; and in Nahr al-Bared in north Lebanon, after an armed group fought the Lebanese Army [in 2007]. What you have here is a group of refugees that have been displaced a second time, a terrible situation."

The children made for a lively audience as they watched a comedic performance on the benefits of eating healthily. Roars of laughter filled the playground when a voluntary performer hobbled into view with a pillow stuffed underneath his shirt. "If you eat junk food you will look like me!" he moaned, stuffing food into his mouth.

The performers were made up of a group of volunteers from the Children of Al-Jaleel Center who have been working closely with ANERA in promoting health issues among Palestinian communities in Lebanon. "The volunteers were great. They were mixing health messages together with fun messages," said Haddad.

Speaking with parents after the event, Shahidi noted the positive effect the day had on the children. "There were intense discussions about smoking among adults due to the material they had been shown about tobacco," he said.

"The involvement of the school administration was also great; they were all very enthusiastic and helpful," he added.

ANERA is due to host a similar event on June 12 where refugees from Iraq will meet with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in an attempt to create links between the two communities. The health day at Bar Elias was ANERA's 20th such event held this year.

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