

For Immediate Release



## **AUB students build refugee shelter, public park, and playground in the South during annual volunteer camp**

Beirut, Lebanon- 30/08/2013 - Off the Sarafand main road and past a dirt road leading to an isolated banana plantation, Nina Bou Ayache, a third-year civil engineering student, wiped off her forehead as she applied lacquer on wood, under the scorching August sun.

Bou Ayache was part of a team of volunteers from the American University of Beirut who were building a wood-concrete-and-tarp structure for Syrian refugees whose current living quarters constituted of shabby tents, in which dozens of adults and children would cram.

“This is the most amazing thing I have done in my major, and it is a big step in true learning, and I heartily recommend it to everyone,” said first time volunteer Nina Bou Ayache, sweat dripping from her face. “I am applying what I have learned, and I see the big difference that exists between theory and practice.”

Some 120 AUB volunteers joined a nine-day volunteer camp August 21-29, organized by the Civil Engineering Society in partnership with the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Services for the seventh year in a row.

Volunteer teams, from engineering, architecture, landscape architecture, and other departments, were distributed among five different projects that included: building a shelter for Syrian refugees in Sarafand; rehabilitating parts of the Mar Yusuf School El Zohour in Tyre; building a public garden and a public park in Tibneen and Tiri, respectively; and constructing a landscaped historic memorial in Mays El-Jabal.

Despite the precarious situation in the country, the AUB students insisted on going ahead with the camp in order to offer their much-needed services to the southern communities.

“After the tragic events in Tripoli and ensuing rockets in Tyre, we seriously considered suspending the camp, but we were overruled by 120 students—literally—who said they will continue on their own and under their full responsibility,” said Mounir Mabsout, CCECS director. “So everyone stayed, except four who had to leave due to pressing circumstances, but on the same evening, two additional students...joined the camp, and they came from Tripoli, which sums up beautifully the prevailing mood and excitement.”

The Sarafand shelter, which takes up to four days to complete, will be about 6x4.5 square meters in size, with a concrete slab for a base, explained Ahmad Bohsali, a final year civil engineering student and project leader. The shelter was designed by an AUB team of students and CCECS members and will be act as a pilot project. “These shelters will offer a much-needed upgrade in terms of living quarters for these refugees,” he added.

Yasser, one of the refugees, said the new structure will improve their situation, protecting them from pests, like rats and ants, which infest the campsite in great numbers. “All the families here are from Homs and we are living on a meager allowance of LL40,500 per person per month handed out to us by the UN, of which LL100,000 is paid per month as rent per family/tent to the landowner,” he explained.

Nearby, a former AUB graphic design student, Dima Mabsout, currently a senior at London’s Central St. Martin Fine Arts College, entertained and taught refugee children painting and storytelling. “They are quite a challenge, have such amazing energy and appreciate all the little things they are offered,” said Mabsout in describing the 35 or so kids she was mentoring.

About 20 minutes south of Sarafand, another team of AUB volunteers was busy creating a mural, building a planting basin, and restoring students’ desks at the Mar Youssef El Zouhour school in Tyre.

“It feels great to be a part of team and the outcomes of teamwork are so gratifying,” said Hassan Mawassi, a four-time volunteer and civil engineer graduate who had taken time off from work to be part of the camp.

“These kids are doing a great job and all their efforts are much-needed and greatly appreciated,” said Sister Rima, who is in charge of the school.

In the town of Tebnine, a one-hour uphill drive east of Tyre, another group of volunteers was toiling away under the hot sun, to create a public garden out of a piece of barren, rocky terrain that had been strewn with litter and garbage before their arrival.

“The unique topography of this terrain allows us to create a multi-zone park, including a romantic section, hidden from the main road,” said Jude Mabsout, a second-year landscaping student, all covered in dust. “We are also planning the planting of various trees and shrubs that require little water, especially olive trees -- for their symbolism.”

“It is very satisfying to see the improvements that we have made, and it has been a great learning experience, despite the heat and dust,” she added. “Luckily we get some cool wind in the afternoons.”

For Maha Mrad, a civil engineering senior and third-time volunteer, the volunteer camp was an extension to her learning experience in the classroom. “This is the best opportunity to test your abilities, learn how to deal with others and communicate effectively, distribute tasks while contributing to serving the community,” she said, giving her shovel a rest.

A little further away, another group of AUB students were building a children’s playground, adjacent to the Tiri municipality building. “It’s great to visit lots of new areas, meet new people, help others and enjoy this enriching experience,” said Maher Dankar, a fourth-year mechanical engineering student and two-time volunteer who was so concentrated on the paint job he was doing that he was delaying taking his lunch break.

Some distance away, in Mays El Jabal, another team was building a memorial that will highlight the landmarks and achievements in the town’s history. “This place used to boast a

very famous school in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the only one in the area,” said Rami Alouta, third-year landscaping student. “It also used to be the passage point of the spice road from India, but sadly about half the town still remains in occupied territory.”

Camp coordinators Nihal Abou Ghali and Issa Saab, both from civil engineering, expressed their initial fears that the given time constraints would not allow the volunteers to finalize all the works as scheduled. “But we overcame all the difficulties, and the most important lesson learned is that theory and practice are two different things,” said Abou Ghali.

The camp ended on Wednesday August 28 with a big celebration in Tyre where all the volunteers celebrated with municipal dignitaries of the towns and villages where the projects took place.

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**Note to Editors**

**About AUB**

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor’s, master’s, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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