

Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation

Expanding Child Care in Times of War

On March 19th, *Democratic Palestine* had the opportunity to interview Anni Kanafani, wife of the martyred Palestinian writer and political leader, Ghassan Kanafani. Anni is one of the founders of the Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation, and serves as vice-chairperson in charge of the kindergarten program. On the occasion of the 17th commemoration of Ghassan's July 1972 martyrdom, and of the International Day of the Child, we print what she related to us about the Foundation's work in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

Tyre, we run a kindergarten for approximately 100 children. Our kindergarten in Mar Elias camp in Beirut has about 100 children, and in North Lebanon, there is one in Badawi camp with 100 children, and one in Nahr Al Bared camp with 200.

NEW PROJECTS FOR HANDICAPPED

In 1986, we opened a new section of the Ain Al Hilweh kindergarten as a project for mentally handicapped children. We began with six children and now we have 20. All the teachers are trained. A Norwegian pre-school teacher specialized in teaching handicapped children came to work on this project, and trained the other teachers. In Lebanon, the ordinary kindergartens are very much like school, whereas we stress creative activities and play, though we do begin teaching reading and writing skills to the children of pre-school level. The mentally handicapped children, however, don't go to regular school, so we have now made a slow-learner program for them. This program also serves children who have dropped out of the UNRWA schools. In the UNRWA schools, a child can repeat a class only once; if they fail again, they drop out, so we are also addressing the problem of these children. We started the Ain Al Hilweh project because we felt the importance of offering something for the handicapped children, as there were really no programs for them. Since we

started, another organization has also started a project for handicapped children in Tyre, so there is development although it is gradual.

In the autumn of 1986, we began the Mar Elias habilitation kindergarten for physically handicapped children. We have 10 children in this program, mainly spastic children who are not mentally handicapped in any way. Very little has been done for these children before; the ordinary schools in Lebanon don't take them, partly because they are not equipped to do so, but also due to the attitude of keeping these children out of sight. This project is in the same building as the Mar Elias kindergarten, so it is a partially integrated program. The handicapped children come on the bus in the morning with the other children and, of course, they are all on the playground together. Once a week, the handicapped children go downstairs to join the other children, and sometimes a group of the other children come up to join the handicapped ones. In the beginning, a specialized Swedish pre-school teacher directed the project, and she trained the other teachers who have continued the work. A Lebanese physiotherapist works with the children two hours daily, and a consulting doctor visits the children weekly.

Every Saturday, we take the children on a trip in the center's bus, either on a picnic or to see a bakery, for example, or other activities. This has more than one purpose. The children get the

chance to be outside and see something new. At the same time, the public becomes accustomed to seeing handicapped children. When people see that someone is taking care of these children, they get very interested, and want to help. Many times they offer the children something. This helps to integrate the children into their surroundings. We have also been able to integrate one child from this project into a regular kindergarten.

Of course, we need special equipment for this center - special chairs and tables which can accommodate wheelchairs. We now have a small workshop producing equipment for these children. Other people have also begun to come to this workshop, so we are making equipment for children outside our own project as well.

TEACHER TRAINING CENTER

Our newest project is the Kindergarten Resource and Training Center in Beirut, for training early childhood teachers working in deprived areas. The idea dates back to the beginning of the 1980s. We were a small group of professionals who started a committee and worked out a proposal for a two-year training program for teachers and supervisors working in existing kindergartens. With the 1982 war, there was no way of doing anything, but we continued the idea. In 1983, we developed close contact with a teachers training school in Denmark that was willing to help, but with the situation in Lebanon, there are no guarantees. In 1985, we reestablished the committee and began a small training project in Mar Elias, sponsored by UNICEF. Finally in 1988, we opened the KG Resource and Training Center to offer a two-year training program for 25 in-service pre-school teachers, with Arabic as the language of instruction. This is important, because although universities offer a B.A. in early childhood education, it is usually in English or French; in the summer, there are short intensive courses in Arabic, but this is limited and not accessible to all.

By setting up the KG Resource and Training Center, we offer a more extensive course, and in Arabic, to ►