Peacebuilding and the Arts - From Bahrain to Boston: Ulafa’a Initiative comes to Brandeis

By Sarah McCarty May 4, 2013

On April 14, 2013, ten Bahraini artists flew to Boston for a weeklong intensive training with Dr. Cynthia Cohen, director of the Peacebuilding and the Arts program at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis University.

These artists belong to the Ulafa’a Initiative in Bahrain, a growing project aiming to connect the different communities of Bahrain and promote creative expression during this time of conflict. The young artists range from painters to filmmakers, all sharing a vision of a brighter future for their home. They write, “Ulafa’a provides opportunities for young creative minds to explore the boundaries of identity and to examine the nature of cultural
conflicts – all in an environment that is creative, challenging and supportive.” Instead of making radical statements about the socio-political status of Bahrain, Ulafa’a focuses on beauty and positivity in their work to strengthen respect, understanding and trust amongst Bahrainis. So far, Ulafa’a has hosted a variety of interactive installations, encouraging not only a public dialogue with people of all backgrounds, but also a direct engagement with the arts.

Over the course of the two months preceding their visit, Dr. Cohen facilitated an international exchange between Brandeis undergraduate and graduate students in the Arts of Building Peace class and the Bahraini artists. Not only were we engaged in a creative collaboration surrounding the values of peacebuilding, but also on a deeper level, we were able to share stories, inspirations and culture.

Bahraini photographer Ali Swar writes, “The pen pal exchange contributed to the experience by introducing us to the culture and diversity between us – it made us realize how connected we are as human beings even though our stories and experiences differed.”

“The pen pal exchange allowed us to dismiss assumptions,” Brontë Velez ’16 explains. Students were able to have a personal connection to another artist, while expanding their ideas of cross-cultural peacebuilding through the arts.

The Ulafa’a team and Brandeis students worked together in an oral history workshop, telling stories, sharing art and collaborating creatively on peacebuilding opportunities. Coming from a place of ongoing conflict and violence, the work of Ulafa’a served as an inspiration during the time of the Boston Marathon bombings. During a week of violence so close by, the Bahraini artists shined a light of encouragement on the Brandeis community. Dr. Cohen writes in Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict, “We use the terms peacebuilding and conflict transformation interchangeably to indicate work aiming toward this kind of long-term, creative change that not only mitigates violence but also addresses the underlying dynamics that characterize and perpetuate a conflict-habituated system.” During the bombing of our own home, the following manhunt and city lockdown, the Bahraini artists reminded us of the power of art and community that Dr. Cohen writes about.

At the end of the week, Ulafa’a installed four of their art initiatives in the Brandeis Student Center. One of the installations, “Our Freej,” was a nationwide social media project Ulafa’a started a few months ago in Bahrain. Instagram users were encouraged to take photos of neighborhoods, sights, or people in Bahrain, and tag them on the application under “#ourfreej.” Ulafa’a printed out all of the photographs and created a mural-type installation in the Adliya district of Manama, Bahrain. They used this project not only to illustrate the beauty of Bahrain, but to connect people around the country through art and social media. As discussed in Dr. Cohen’s work, the act of redefining space in relationship to others can be an extremely valuable step towards building peace. Hussain Alkamaish’s time lapse of the Brandeis installation of “Our Freej” can be found at: http://youtu.be/JqCuIzmB1ec
Though the opening of the Brandeis exhibit fell on the day of the Boston area lockdown, Ulafa’a kept spirits up by bringing out Bahraini delicacies and homemade bookmarks, postcards and shirts for the Brandeis community to enjoy. Brandeis students of all disciplines entered the gallery space full of curiosity and hope, asking questions about the small country of Bahrain, the Ulafa’a Initiative and peacebuilding. “Seeing their dedication and creativity was inspiring to me and reaffirmed how important and possible this sort of work is,” Alia Goldfarb ’13 said. “If a small group like theirs can flourish in an environment like Bahrain, so many more things must be possible.”

Having studied the theoretical frameworks of peacebuilding and the arts all semester and as a sculptor myself, this experience was not only a good example of young artists around the world engaging with these strategies through their work, it was also a beautiful cultural exchange and the rich foundation of many memories to come.

I have compiled a slideshow of the experience, which can be found at:

http://youtu.be/KKxg1bxPKIc

More on the Ulafa’a Initiative can be found at: http://ulafaainitiative.blogspot.com/

For more information about Peacebuilding and the Arts at Brandeis, please visit http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/