

Lebanon Interfaith Eldercare Group is Considered to be a Phenomenon of Cooperation

The Lebanese people are gracious, warm, fun to be with and yet it is their resilience that truly portrays their genuine selves. It is these characteristics that have become the foundation for the organization of the Lebanon Interfaith Eldercare Group to establish assisted living centers throughout Lebanon. The group founded in 2015 is composed of Shia, Sunni, Druze, Maronite, Latin Catholic, Armenian Protestant, and Protestant Christian.

Although it is easy to say an organization such as this one is a phenomenon in Lebanon, only when one understands the history of the country can it be understood why the forming of this group is truly remarkable.

Reference to “the war” is frequent in Lebanese conversations with the words, before, during and since being denominators of the civil conflict that took place from 1975 to 1990. The social structure of the population and more significantly, the family structure, were forever changed during those 15 years with civilian fatality estimates as high as 200,000.

Prior to the war, as many as four generations lived in one single family home, with the middle generation caring for their parents and sometimes grandparents as well as their own children. Those relationships rapidly changed as whole family generations were killed or seriously wounded. The family home was frequently destroyed and personal property was sometimes stolen, and was often seen being used or worn by others in the family’s circle of daily encounters.

So how is it that a population described as warm could engage in war? Among that population, multiple religious sects of Christians and Muslims exist and each passionately believed that the doctrine of their religion was the one that should predominate. In 1932, the majority of political power known as a confessional system was given to the Christian Maronites as they had a larger population than the Muslims.

However the system was flawed and soon the political environment of not only Lebanon, but also Israel, Syria, and Palestine became intertwined with the system and eventually a war erupted that was external as well as internal to Lebanon.

The elders are among those who are most severely affected, for it is they who may have lost not only a spouse, but also a child who they had depended upon to care for them in their aging years as the Lebanese tradition prescribes.

Many of the surviving younger generation leave the country to seek education or job opportunities elsewhere. And those who remain are still severely affected by the trauma of the violence they witnessed.

The absence of the younger generation to care for the elders is a devastating dilemma for the country because other than elder care on the nursing home level, the country is poorly prepared to care for the older generation. There is only one assisted living center in Lebanon, Moadieh Evangelical Center, among the 53 long-term care centers in the entire

country and it opened in 2012 with Joyce Eid as the General Manager. The level of nursing care in the other centers varies from poor to excellent and not every city or village has access to good care. There is minimal government support.

To compensate for the lack of availability, the first option for care of the elder is most often to employ in-home care that is usually no more than a housemaid from a country such as Ethiopia. However that person soon becomes responsible for the daily needs of the elderly resident, not just the home, even though she may be ill prepared to do so.

A building was donated to the National Evangelical Church of Beirut and to facilitate the creation of the assisted living center, the Mennonite Central Committee of the United States, arranged for Eid to travel to a small town in Central California, where a well-respected retirement community of the Mennonite Brethren Church would provide education for modeling the assisted living center in Beirut. Palm Village Retirement Community in Reedley, welcomed Eid to live in an assisted living suite on their 17-acre campus, directed by CEO/President, David Reimer.

For 30 days, Eid shadowed Palm Village's staff in every aspect of care and interacted with the residents of the Continuing Care Community to become well informed in the daily operations of an elder care assisted living center as well as other levels of care.

Upon Eid's return to Lebanon, the Moadieh Evangelical Center opened. Shortly after opening, the philosophy of welcoming elders of all religions was noticed by Mr. Waid Joumblat, an influential leader of the Druze religion. With a visit to the center, he was impressed with the new concept of Assisted Living and connected Eid with the manager of the Druze senior care services. Reimer visited the Center in 2014 to further consult on operations.

With the need for assisted living care rapidly increasing, Eid became profoundly interested in implementing the National Evangelical Church's vision for changing the social environment to one that would provide elder care for anyone in need, no matter what his or her religious belief. She would make the phenomenon of non-cooperative religious sects in this country cooperating, real.

Eid was and still is the driving force in the group's organization as it was she who made the initial phone calls to the administrators of the senior care centers of the religious sects, inviting them to meet for the common goal of uniting efforts for better care for the elders. The rejections she frequently received as she made the calls were countered by the encouragement of Reimer to persist, until she was successful.

Eventually representatives of ten long-term care centers of different faiths, along with Reimer and the late Ken Enns, also influential in the development, with intense hesitancy, met in Cyprus in 2015 to share and learn from each other. The Group was initially formalized at this conference.

The Group recognizes that although they were driven apart, before, during and since the war, right now, they have the same challenges and concerns and therefore the same solutions may work for all. They have an even deeper goal of being an organization that can be a model for peaceful cooperation in business sectors other than eldercare.

As a result of the 2015 Cyprus conference, the group members visited a rotating location of their Eldercare nursing centers each month so that they could learn from each other and inspire each other to improve the care in their own center.

Reimer remains in continual communication with Eid and on April 22, 2017, the second Lebanese Interfaith Elder Care Conference was held supported by memorial donations for the late Ken Enns, this time in Lebanon. It is now evident that the members have removed all barriers of communication and gone beyond that to seek and trust the opinions of one another.

Three speakers from the USA, Rick Stiffney, CEO of Mennonite Health Services, Nadim Abi-Antoun, COO of Presbyterian Homes in Chicago and Philippe Saad, an architect for DiMella Shaffer in Boston, gave presentations on board development, operations, and design models for assisted living centers, respectively.

Although Abi-Antoun and Saad are USA residents they were raised in Lebanon, where relatives still reside and they have a clear understanding of the challenges of Eldercare in Lebanon.

During the wrap-up at the end of the conference, the group members spoke openly about their goals. They affirmed the need to continue to share practices and education and to establish a formal legal organization in Lebanon. They hope to be a model for peace, not only in this interfaith group, but also for other programs that will prosper with an all-inclusive policy.

It is clear; as a result of the Group's efforts that Eldercare – even under the most difficult of social influences – can and should be a priority for society. The value of the Elders, as experienced and wise individuals who cared for the younger generation during the most excruciating circumstances and the subsequent years must be acknowledged and respected. The care of Elders is essential and the Lebanese Interfaith Elder Care Group is a model for progress and peace with their successes.

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