



Norma Nashed met with His Royal Highness Prince Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein, Ambassador of Jordan to the United States on October 21st in Washington. HRH Prince Zeid is very supportive of Reaching Hearts for Kids' work around the world.

A Beltsville Humanitarian Reflects 10 Years On

by Jim Butcher

A decade has passed since that special day in 1999 when Norma Nashed founded a new charitable organization. She would call her organization **Reaching Hearts for Kids** (RHK). A non-profit, charitable organization, it would qualify for 501(c)(3) status, meaning that donors may treat donations as deductions for federal income tax purposes.

Ten years and hundreds of impoverished kids later, the organization that Nashed founded and still directs from her modest condominium apartment on Cherry Hill Road reaches out to over 2,500 destitute children in 13 of the world's poorest countries. Several eastern and southern African countries where RHK operates cooperative programs suffer the devastating effects of widespread

poverty, civil unrest, and high rates of HIV/AIDS infections--or perhaps all three in deadly combination, she said.

RHK exists to provide shelter, health care, food, and basic

educational support for usually orphaned or abandoned kids in struggling countries around the world. There is much need for help here at home, she says, but great, great unmet needs exist among the poorest of the poor. Those poorest of countries are where she has chosen to concentrate her attention.

A clue to the genius of Nashed's remarkable success is her uncanny ability to partner RHK resources with a seemingly endless string of private donors and cooperator organizations, many of the latter being non-government organizations (NGOs). The RHK web site lists 18 formal partners and a twelve-member board of directors. Norma Nashed's name appears with the title of Founder/Executive Director.

Nowhere are the effects of Nashed's creative genius more evident than in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Kinshasa, RHK partners with the Foundation for Africa in Hungary to help 1,200 students of Othniel College with food, clothing, and educational assistance. The partners recently established a new orphanage there that houses 11 children, most the offspring of parents who have died of AIDS. Nashed says as many as 40 percent of those orphans may be infected with the AIDS virus. She notes that experts estimate that there are as many as

12 million HIV-infected orphans living in Southern Africa. According to a UNICEF report, there are 4 million orphaned children living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone.

Still in the Congo, RHK in partnership with HELP International and with funds (\$85,000) donated by Dr. Mitchell Davis, a Washington, D.C. physician, recently brought on-line a new well to provide clean drinking water and better sanitation, for the students of Othniel College, in Kinshasa. During her recent trip to Congo in July 2009, Norma, in partnership with ADRA/Goma, initiated a feeding program for 1,500 orphans in a refugee camp school in Goma, East Congo, where the fighting still continues after 15 years.

Besides its work in Southern African countries, RHK operates partnerships in Bolivia, India, Indonesia, and prominently in Nashed's native land of Jordan. In Bolivia, RHK supports the work of Familia Feliz, a school and orphanage that provides primary education for children who have been orphaned, abandoned, or abused. In India, RHK lends support to a school in Hyderabad that provides school supplies and a daily hot meal for children who might otherwise be forced into child labor camps. In Indonesia, RHK sponsors and supports four orphanages that sustain 120 children. In Jordan, RHK supports 25 high school students, several of them refugees from Iraq and Sudan.

What lies in store to celebrate the beginning of RHK's second decade? Unsurprisingly, Nashed has the

perfect answer in something impressively titled "The Southern Africa Community Empowerment Cook-stove Project." As is only to be expected, Nashed has partnered the project with an established organization, this time with ECHO Aid Australia in conjunction with Australia's World Relief Overseas Aid Fund. The project aims to replace traditional charcoal-burning cooking devices with modern, fuel-efficient, cook stoves made of stainless steel. The benefits of the new German-made cook stoves are many and far reaching, not the least of which is the elimination of the need for cash-strapped families to buy expensive charcoal cooking fuel. The new stoves require only small, relatively inexpensive sticks or small pieces of wood. More, the new cook stoves are far more efficient and environmentally friendly than charcoal burning devices.

Sponsors estimate that for every twelve stoves placed a new local job will be created. The ultimate beneficiaries, they believe, are the children who may benefit from educational opportunities because of greater family savings combined with income from job opportunities. It should come as no surprise to learn that Norma Nashed is looking for donors willing to donate funds to purchase new stoves and place them with needy African families. At a cost of only \$340 per stove, Norma estimates that a single donated stove can generate sufficient funds for a Southern African family to send a child to school for 12 years. Here is where to learn more: www.reachinghearts4kids.org, office

301.931.8433, cell 240.602.6138.

Readers who have bothered to read this far may have an interest in learning a little more about the remarkable, enterprising woman that is Norma Nashed; she who discourses as easily in three great Western European languages as she does in her native Arabic. A brief rundown follows.

Born to Christian parents in Palestine--in what now is named the West Bank--Norma's father moved the family to Amman, Jordan, while Norma was a small child. In Amman, Norma's religiously faithful family was desperately poor. Sometimes there was no or little food for Norma and her six siblings. For five years Norma cleaned her school in exchange for tuition. When her father passed away suddenly, her family's plight descended from merely poor to downright desperate.

Good fortune seems to intervene in mysterious ways at Norma's bleakest moments. After her father's passing, one of many life-transforming events presented itself in the persons of Seventh Day Adventist missionary Dr. Robert Darnell and his wife. The Darnells would informally adopt Norma and take her with them on re-assignment to Beirut, Lebanon. In Beirut, Norma completed high school and college before returning to Amman as a young adult. Living with the Darnells, she had perfected her English and learned French while growing up in the Lebanese capital.

Popular wisdom has it that young Christian women are not to thrive or succeed in predominantly Muslim

societies such as Amman's. But Norma Nashed appears never to have received the message. For instance, she parlayed her exceptional language and managerial skills into becoming personal secretary to Ali Ghandour, organizer and later Chief Executive Officer of Royal Jordanian Airlines. (Incidentally, Ali Ghandour now sits on the RJK board of directors.) Eventually, Norma would become the airline's Sales Promotion Manager in Cairo--the only woman to hold a similar position in Egypt. Astonishingly, Norma was selected to attend the first private pilot training course offered in Jordan. Unfortunately, just as she was making rapid progress learning to fly a twin engine Cessna aircraft, war broke out in the Middle East. Norma was forced to abandon a budding flying career.

By 1985, Norma had decided to immigrate to the United States. Her basic motivation was to secure a better life and educational opportunities for her young son. The son, now grown and the father of two young children, lives in nearby Burtonsville.

Norma landed in Takoma Park, where close relatives lived. She would work for an organization called Home Study International, now Griggs University. There she would put a natural gift for languages to good use co-authoring an English-As-a-Second-Language (ESL) program for Arabic speakers. Working with ESL, Norma decided to learn Spanish, too. Thus, she came to add Spanish to a portfolio of languages that previously contained English, French, and her native Arabic.

Near disaster struck in 1989 when Norma was diagnosed with a rare skin cancer. The disease would transform her life forever. She would try every recommended treatment and prescription, but to little effect. In time, the disease would disappear of some unknown volition, perhaps owing to Norma's characteristic luck and good fortune, perhaps to an unseen power. She also would incur a painful arthritis in her hands and fingers.

She would interpret her health problems as a signal to dedicate herself to a new direction, a new purpose. And she would find both in the organization she would call Reaching Hearts for Kids.

As a reporter's interview drew to a close, Norma speculated aloud if she might offer a favorite passage for this article. Encouraged to do that, she later would dispatch an e-mail. It would define her mission and purpose in these eloquent words from James 1:27: *...to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

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