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A J E E C  
ARAB-JEWISH CENTER FOR EQUALITY, EMPOWERMENT AND COOPERATION  
המרכז הערבי-יהודי לשוויון, העצמה ושיתוף  
أحييك: المركز العربي-اليهودي للمساواة التمكين والتعاون

October 10, 2007

## **The Community Educational Activity Center Program in the Arab Bedouin Villages Khashem Zanah and Kaser Alsar**

### **SUMMARY REPORT: APRIL 2006- SEPTEMBER 2007**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The change in name of the project from *Play and Leisure Program for 4-8 Year Old Children* to *Community Educational Activity Center Program* reflects the developments and changes this program has undergone since its approval by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the official beginning of operations in April 2006. Guided by the findings of the preliminary community survey commissioned by the Foundation, the project focused on the needs of children aged 4 to 8, and was designed to establish playgrounds and the operate an organized play and leisure program for this age group in two unrecognized Arab Bedouin villages in the northeastern Negev. The pre-conditions for the participation of these villages in the project were that they would be prepared "to commit themselves to active cooperation in the development and operation of the project and provide a readily accessible 'public space' to serve as a playground and leisure activity area for young children aged 4 to 8. While meeting these conditions turned out to be a far more formidable task than initially anticipated, two villages, *Khashem Zanah* and *Kaser Alsar*, eventually became our enthusiastic partners in this endeavor.

An authentic community development project must by definition be responsive to the needs of the community as perceived by its members, no less than its own agenda. The *Community Educational Activity Centers* in *Khashem Zanah* and *Kaser Alsar* reflect this ongoing interactive process. Measuring the achievements of the project to date against the yardstick of the project goals and objectives as set forth in the initial work plan, we can state with some measure of satisfaction that we are well on the way to meeting all of these. The major digression from the original objectives is in the provision of leisure time activities for children of all age groups by the *Community Educational Activity Centers* in *Khashem Zanah* and *Kaser Alsar*, and no less, in the active engagement of parents as partners in this effort.

### **Goals and Objectives**

*The overriding goal of the proposed project is to provide an enriching, stimulating, accessible and safe play and leisure time environment for children ages 4 to 8 in 'unrecognized' Arab Bedouin villages in the Negev for whom no such provisions are presently available.*

### **Operational objectives**

- ◆ *To construct and equip playgrounds and leisure activity areas for young children in 2 'unrecognized' Arab Bedouin villages in the Negev.*
- ◆ *To train teams of local residents as playground facilitators and counselors.*
- ◆ *To organize and train teenagers from the communities as junior counselors who will help to organize sports, group games, etc. with the younger children.*
- ◆ *To provide a year - round, daily play and enrichment activity program for children up to age 8, as well as a stimulating environment providing ample opportunities for free and imaginative play.*

### **PREPARATORY STAGE: APRIL –OCTOBER 2006**

Identifying target communities meeting our conditions turned out to be a more formidable task than initially anticipated. Most of the villages peripheral to the towns of *Kseife* and *Arara*, our originally-designated catchment area, consisted of households dispersed over a wide area with no central public space, so that even if an appropriate site could be identified, it would not be readily accessible to a sufficient number of children to justify the investment. However, by mid-July 2006, two sites had been selected and negotiations were well under way. The first of these was *El Dada*, where the *Parents as Partners* project was already operating. A suitable site was identified; the village leaders were enthusiastic, and preparations began for construction of the playground were well under way when a dispute among members of the family that had agreed to provide the site led to termination of all negotiations and withdrawal from the project. With the assistance of the *Council of Unrecognized Bedouin Villages*, a suitable alternative to *El Dada* was found: the unrecognized village of *Khashem Zanah*, on the road to Dimona, some 15 km. south of Beer Sheva (outside our original catchment area), which met all our conditions, and work on the site began on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006.

The second village selected, *Kaser Alser*, was within the mandate of the recently established Abu Basma Regional Council. The *Abu Basma Regional Council* was enthusiastic and anxious to cooperate with us on the project, as was the local village committee. However, here too considerable time elapsed until a suitable site was found and negotiated, and until official approval for this utilization of the land for this purpose was granted by the relevant authorities.

Yet another unanticipated difficulty had to be dealt with. While our original design for the playground had envisioned utilizing recycled materials (automobile tires, cable spools, etc.) to construct 'ecologically sound' playground equipment, it emerged that chances of obtaining a license to operate a playground equipped with our 'home-made' provisions from the Israeli Institute of Standards were slight. We therefore turned to one of the recommended suppliers of approved playground equipment, thus making costs considerably higher than originally anticipated.

## **THE KASER ALSER EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY CENTER**

### **January-May 2007: Beginnings**

*Kaser Alser*: the village is located some 5 km. west of the town of *Dimona* and is the furthest removed from Beer Sheva of all our project sites. Although incorporated into the *Abu Basma Regional Council*, and hence an officially recognized village, its municipal infrastructure is rudimentary – meaning that for all intents and purposes it is not that different from other, 'unrecognized' villages. *Kaser Alser* is one of the largest Bedouin villages, with a population of some 3,000 – but dispersed over an area of some 3 km. – which means that our *Community Educational Activity Center* can (as is the case in *Khashem Zaneh*) meet the needs of only part of the village population. However, the village boasts three recently-established pre-schools for 3-5 year olds – one of them very near the location of our Center, which itself is also fairly near to the local primary and middle school.

In December 2006 we received final approval for the project from the *Abu Basma Regional Council* and the *Kaser Alser* village committee, which appointed one of its members, Mr. Amer El Hawashle, as liaison person representing the community. Mr. El Hawashle is an enthusiastic supporter of the project; himself a physical education instructor, he is also the organizer and coach of the local youth football team.

The resignation of the AJEEC projects director, Mr. Yousef Abu Jaffar, in February 2007 resulted in an inevitable delay in the construction of the *Kaser Alser* playground and activity center, which had to wait until his replacement, Mr. Ariel Daloomy, was able to take charge of this endeavor. Construction began in April and was completed by early June, thus permitting the initiation of actual activities in June 2007.

### **June-September 2007: Initiation of Program Activities**

While both are Arab Bedouin villages, *Kaser Alser* is significantly different from *Khashem Zaneh*, and it was obvious from the beginning that we would have to develop a program responsive to local self-perceptions, needs and constraints. At the insistence of the village committee, a cinderblock building, rather than a tent, was constructed for indoor activities. Since this, as a 'recognized' village, does not suffer from building restrictions, one may assume that there was possibly some symbolic significance to this insistence. Having had previous (negative) experiences with well-meaning interventions and promises that didn't quite work out, the community had a "wait and see" attitude, and only when the playground and its facilities was up and standing was it possible to engage them in planning and preparing the program.

#### ***Working with Mothers***

A series of training workshops were held in the latter half of June and throughout July and August, in order to provide mothers with the tools enabling them to play an active role in the program. 18 women participated in these workshops, which covered subjects such as the role of play, games and toys, developmental stages, communication with children, and the role of women as community change leaders. Plans call for the continuation of these 3 hour-long workshops on a weekly basis, after the end of Ramadan.

#### ***The Early Childhood Program***

Fatem, a mother of three with prior experience in a play program, assumed responsibility for the early childhood program for 2 – 5 year olds, which operated on a daily basis from 9:00 to 12:00 throughout July and August. With the beginning of the school year, the 3 to 5 year olds began attending the nearby pre-school, leaving only some 8 children in the program. Under these circumstances, the necessity and viability of this part of the program becomes questionable. This is an issue that will shortly be coming up for consideration.

***The Afternoon Activity Program for School Children***

Mona, a third year student of education at the Achva Teachers' Training College, assumed responsibility for the afternoon activity program, and in July began working with the 8 to 15 year olds 3 times weekly, twice weekly with the younger children and once a week on Friday mornings with the older group. In August, Mona and the mothers' group organized a five day summer camp program for 50 children, which was a great success.

After Ramadan, Mona will begin a training program for junior counselors from the community, similar to Mofid's program in in *Khashem Zaneh*.

***On November 11, we will celebrate the official opening of the Kaser Alser Educational Activity Center, at which the guest of honor will be the Minister of Welfare, Mr. Yaakov Hertzog.***