



EVERY CHILD'S RIGHT TO

Intro with Danna Molly Weiss
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If you had asked me to predict my future at the budding age of 10, the last place I'd have guessed I'd land would have been Jordan, managing the start-up of an international organisation called Right To Play. I was hardly a sporty type of girl. I dreaded PE class with a passion. Painfully shy and always the last to be chosen by my peers for any activity, I would slink out of my place in line to avoid my turn at softball bat. Last but not least, my gigantic glasses seemed to be magnetically attracted to balls. No matter what sport we were ordered to play – volleyball, basketball, football – at some point, the ball would slam into my face, leaving me pink and crying amidst giggling classmates. I loved tennis, mainly because the ball was too

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small to really sting when it hit.

Incredibly modest, I detested changing into my PE uniform in front of the other girls. I couldn't figure out how to open my locker, and was inevitably late to each class. My mother was a teacher at the school. She somehow borrowed the locker room key and a flashlight, and one

morning at 6am, we broke into the girls' locker room like two cat burglars and practiced turning my combination until I could open it gracefully. Although my parents supported me in my studies and taught me that the sky is the limit, I grew into adolescence with low self-esteem. Eventually I outgrew my gawky teenage years, but in truth,



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when I see myself in the mirror, it is always the girl who was chosen last to play.

I forgot all about my PE woes when at age 16, I met Marwa, an Egyptian student at my high school. Instant best friends, we taught each other so much. She invited me to Ramadan *iftar*, and my family hosted her for Thanksgiving. She taught me Arabic poetry and I introduced her to Tupac's street rap. When we had slumber parties at her house, I would beg her mother to prepare me *labaneh* with *zaatar*, and Marwa – trying to fit in with American culture – would stick her tongue out and opt for sugary cereal with milk. We were too young to think of our cultural differences as anything beyond intriguing and fun. Together, we convinced our favourite history teacher to offer a course on the modern Middle East. Beginning that first spring day of class when we spoke about the Arab Revolt, Bedouin culture, and the *hajj*, I have never lost my fascination and respect for the Middle East and its people. That day, I promised myself that I would eventually live in the Middle East. I wanted to do more than visit as a tourist. I wanted to learn and contribute.

I went on to study for seven years and three degrees towards that dream. I earned an MA

in Middle Eastern studies from Harvard University and spent two years conducting field work in local mosques and Islamic high schools, learning everything I could cram in about Arabic, Islam and gender. I listened to Um Kulthum, read works by Mahmoud Darwish and conjugated rare verbs in *fus-ha*. Soon the dream danced through the air like sweet, apple-scented *shisha* smoke, blanketing all of my thoughts and wishes.

I spent one year volunteering with a family of nine Sudanese refugees through the International Rescue Committee. Traumatized by what they had lived through, the seven young children would not speak and did not know how to play. As refugees, I felt a special connection to them. The US is a nation of immigrants and refugees. Like the parents of these children, my own ancestors had made grand sacrifices so that I could have a future – travelling for months with reeking animals in the bottom of a boat bound from Europe, heartbroken to be leaving their homes behind. I spent hours each week singing songs and doing art projects, dances and outdoor activities with the children. Slowly, they began to speak and laugh for the first time in their lives. I learnt from them then that play is

the best universal medicine for any child in pain. It was after that experience that I knew I wanted to make a difference with children in the Middle East.

After more than 10 years, and some hands-on work experience, my teenage dream finally came to fruition. I was hired as Project Manager Jordan for Right To Play (RTP), an organisation founded by Olympic speed skating gold medallist Johann Koss of Norway. Right To Play is an athlete-driven humanitarian organisation that uses sport and play as tools for the development of children and youth in the most disadvantaged areas of the world. Its guiding principles are inclusion, which recognises the importance of children who may be marginalised for reasons of gender, culture, disability or social background; and sustainability, which ensures lasting impact of programmes.

RTP is headquartered in Canada but operates in 22 countries; in the Middle East, children are playing in the occupied Palestinian territories, Lebanon, the UAE, and now Jordan. All RTP programmes are rooted in the concept of Sport For Development and Peace, which came from the growing recognition that strengthening the right of children to play enhances their healthy development and builds stronger communities. Our motto is "When children play, the world wins!" Hiring only local staff and working directly with local governments, NGOs and schools, each RTP project is a community effort. I chose to work with the organisation because I loved the idea of getting to work with locals to empower them to build something for

themselves, all the while sharing in local culture.

When I arrived in Amman in August 2006, I had to hit the ground running with the support of regional and HQ staff. RTP was expected to establish a country office in Amman, recruit and train local staff and have children playing by early 2007. After weeding through over 400 applications, I found my dream team of six project coordinators. From Amman, Lamis Shishani (a female basketball player and coach) and Ali Subhet (a professional handball player); from Zarqa, Sarya Hussein (an experienced children and women's counsellor) and Jamal Habib (a retired police officer and UN peacekeeper); from Irbid, Rola Sadieh (a female track star and former kindergarten teacher) and Mohannad Shishani (a gymnast and yoga expert). Far away from my family, they have become my sisters and brothers. And just like the children we serve, our favourite activity is play. We begin all meetings with a game. We share life's silliness, struggles, hopes, tragedies and triumphs.

Although we are a young organisation, as a team we think ambitiously. We intend to be in Jordan indefinitely, and to be registered as a Jordanian non-governmental organisation working with all children in the country, in every area, both in and beyond the school systems. We operate on a partnership philosophy, which means that we only work in a community if a local organisation extends an invitation. We don't wish to impose our vision on anyone; we want others to share our vision and mould it according to their desires and dreams.

A strong partner in RTP projects in the

RTP Jordan is actively seeking local partners throughout the country – government ministries, kindergartens, schools, sports clubs and international organisations, and is also always looking for volunteers to contribute time or to coach in specialised sport that can be passed onto the coaches and children; tae kwon do, yoga, basketball... you name it, they'll try it! For more information, call 077 6727301 or visit www.righttoplay.com

occupied Palestinian territories and Lebanon, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was the first local organisation to extend an invitation to bring Right To Play to Jordan. Together, we agreed to run a pilot project in 12 UNRWA schools with approximately 45 teachers and 3,000 children. We would work in four areas of Jordan: North Amman, South Amman, Irbid and Zarqa. After an assessment of the schools, we began with children in first to third grades, as they do not have specialised physical education instructors

but are taught PE by their primary school teachers. In overcrowded schools, where physical education is often the only opportunity to burn energy and laugh exuberantly during the day, we found that these children needed RTP the most. As a foreigner, I was shocked by the quality of UNRWA facilities and teaching; the walls at many of the schools were adorned with children's artwork and handicrafts; many of the teachers seemed to genuinely love their students.

Ms Majedah Shraideh, head teacher of Marqa Coeducational School 1, confided in me that she was saddened because her students went home after school and sat in front of the television eating chips and zoning out. Their traditional Palestinian games and rhymes were dying out with the older generation, and they knew little about their heritage. Because their parents were so busy working to feed and support them, they didn't have time to encourage their children to do anything beyond studying. So the children at Majedah's school literally did not know how to play. They were missing imagination. She hopes that RTP will reduce violence among the children and provide them with creative ways to fill their spare time.

In December, we ran intensive training for 45 UNRWA teachers. By February 2007, the teachers began to implement one of our programme modules with their children during PE. During the first week, I visited Hay Nazzal Girls School, a tiny, rented school with a play yard the size of a modest living room. Until RTP, there was no physical education for these girls. The well-meaning teachers were terrified of running games in such tight quarters. Together with my colleague, I visited Ms Samira Al-Sofy's girls' class at Nazzal.

I found 30 little girls in neat rows in the schoolyard preparing to run their first race. They watched Ms Samira demonstrate the relay as if they were seeing a man walk on the surface of the moon for the first time. Their faces registered shock, curiosity and amusement. It was clear



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that some of them had literally never played, and certainly none of them had ever seen their beloved Ms Samira demonstrate how to run a race. Seeing their laughing faces as they ran that day was the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. It made seven years of studying and the sacrifice of leaving my family seem utterly justified. At the end of the class, I cooled down with the girls, swaying like a willow tree beside them and Ms Samira and waving goodbye to each girl.

The administration and teachers of Zarqa Elementary Girls 1 School decided to hold a play day. In all of its 50 years, this school had never seen a play day. I will never forget the feeling of pride that buzzed through the air that day. Participating teachers had thrown themselves into decorating for this event, planning the games and preparing the girls. The entire school was decorated with posters, fabric artwork and balloons.

Rather than sit and sip tea on the sidelines, my entire team actively played with the children, encouraging them to try something new and applauding their efforts. I watched the faces and movements of these girls – poised on the sharp precipice of adolescence – and thought how important these memories will be for them when they face the challenges of their coming teenage years.

Over and over again, I'm overwhelmed with the energy of our teachers. The teachers give our team as great an education as the RTP gives them; it is an exchange of learning and friendship. One teacher had serious heart surgery just days before the training and yet ran for two hours with his boys on our play day. Mr Ghazi Da' das, at Nuzha Elementary Boys School 1, left his home in Baqa'a at 6am each morning to arrive on time for our training. His play sessions move with the discipline of a joyful army.



At our play day at Husn Camp Elementary Boys School, we were overwhelmed

that sports legends and famous local athletes alike turned out to support the project. Ms Fatima Al Kayyili, Head Teacher at Ashrafieh Prep Girls School 2 actually led the warm-up herself, demonstrating to the girls and the community that everyone can play together. I've seen teachers gaining confidence and authority as they strengthen their mentoring relationships with students as a result of play. As Mr Mohamad Mustafa Fouda of Irbid Town Elementary Boys School declared, as a result of the bonding taking place through play and sport, "now I am the one that the boys come to for advice."

I recently visited Zarqa Elementary Girls 2 School and played with Fatima Allbhai and her students. She told me, "After RTP class, I always observe happiness in the girls' eyes that I've never seen before this project. The relationship between me and my students is now much more positive. They respect and love me more since I've started to play with them."

I've begun to notice subtle differences in the lives of my team mates as well. Our oldest member, Jamal Habib, is a father of 12 and retired police officer. As a result of our project, he is playing with his children for the first time in his



life. He comes home after work and they request the game of the day.

My own life will never be quite the same after Jordan and Right To Play. I've fallen in love with the people of Jordan. I have never met such graciousness in my life, such welcome and such interest in the project. Some of my new West Amman friends laugh and think I'm crazy for loving to shop in Zarqa, savouring dried figs off the string on the side of the road in Jerash and adoring Arabic music and *turmos* in downtown Amman.

At the last play day, I thanked the teachers and UNRWA leadership for giving a foreigner the opportunity to participate in their community project. Khalil Radwan, the UNRWA Human Rights Supervisor, said, "No, Danna, you are not a foreigner. You are part of our family." Thanks to the people of Jordan, I will never be that awkward, unaccepted girl again, and luckily, I am able to work each day to ensure that Jordan's girls and boys do not experience that feeling either.

Our CEO, Johann Koss, recently visited Amman, and we had the opportunity to meet with the Chairman of the High Commission for Youth, Dr Atif Adiebat, to discuss the future of children in Jordan. Johann's parting words to me were, "Think big!" My advice to Jordan is the same as Johann's: Think big for the future of your children. Anything is possible, and your children are waiting to play.