

AUB students adorn walls near campus with bits of culture

By Sara Mourad

BEIRUT: "In Beirut, I constantly feel like I'm in a wedding," said Benjamin Hourani as he looked at the walls of Abdel-Aziz Street. He was watching AUB students as they painted the walls near the AUB campus, leading to Bliss Street. Hourani, a Lebanese-American, is an AUB Political Sciences alumnus and now a retired professor in the US. Accompanied by his son Adnan, he paid his first visit to Beirut in a very long time, and both were mesmerized by what they saw. "AUB gives students a great sense of what it means to be a leader, in a civic sense of engagement," he noted.

In fact, on January 10, AUB students displayed their communal engagement by dedicating their weekend to paint the walls surrounding the AUB campus. Abdel-Aziz and John Kennedy streets witnessed a day-long activity with students painting Arabic poetry on the walls. After scraping off layers of posters, then cleaning and painting the walls in yellow paint, some 60 student volunteers began writing Arabic quotes, song lyrics, and verses famous of poetry.

"Getting to write the quotes was the most fulfilling moment, especially because I personally don't read or write Arabic and I ended up doing a great job with the calligraphy," said student Dani Hamra. The quotes had already been submitted a few weeks before by the students themselves following a call for proposals by the Neighborhood Initiative and the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCECS) who co-organized the activity.

With Beirut as the central theme, students submitted verses by Nizar Kabbani, Adonis, Lamartine, and Khaled el Haber among others. Then came the design phase as AUB students, namely Graphic Design, Fine Arts, Landscape Design, and Art Club students, created specific calligraphic drawings for each of the quotes.

Arabic calligraphy is an old practice, engrained in Arabic street culture and constantly reproduced in new ways and forms. On Friday, a workshop was organized in the office of the CCECS to finalize the quote designs and make sure everything was ready for Saturday. Graphic Design professor Lina Ghaibeh and the organizers were there to lend some last-minute advice to students. The workshop was intended for students to get acquainted with the different kinds of brushes they need, mixing colors techniques, and the location and real dimensions of the walls.

On Saturday morning, everyone gathered at AUB's Medical Gate at 9:00 a.m. Following a quick manakeesh breakfast, students were divided into three groups and escorted to their working areas.

The Saab Library wall needed the most work as it was covered with multiple layers of posters, graffiti and dirt. But the students were keen on accomplishing their task, and soon started painting the walls.

Here, the Diana Tamari Sabbagh building wall on John Kennedy Street proved to be the most challenging with a rigid texture that required multiple layers of paint. Walking up Abdel-Aziz Street, music could be heard and students were spotted from a distance wearing bright yellow T-Shirts that were distributed by the organizers. Everyone was delighted to see AUB president Peter Dorman and his wife, who dropped by to encourage volunteers and stood for pictures with the students and the newly painted walls.

On Abdel-Aziz Street, students had already begun painting their quote "Oh Hamra Street, the street of colors." Mrs. Shuman, resident in the "Ajial" Gallery building, stood across the street observing the students' painting progress.

"Ras Beirut has a secular, mixed spirit. People have to revive this spirit," she said. Next to her stood Amine Fattouh, who timidly called himself a "poet." Fattouh's pen name, "Beirut lover," reveals his fondness of the city, and of poetry; he was more than pleased to see young students paint the dirty city walls with Arabic poetry verses. "The culture of citizenship should be spread among more than AUB and LAU students," he said. "Beirut is more than Hamra Street. This initiative should be duplicated elsewhere." Mrs. Shuman, who had been a resident of Hamra for the past 40 years, was well acquainted with AUB students. "This is their area. We hear their loud

chants every year on student elections day so it's nice to see them working here today," she said.

This is the spirit the Neighborhood Initiative attempts to create through this and other activities. Neighborhood Initiative director Cynthia Myntti and her student assistants Lamiece Jamil and Dima Rachid were running up and down the street, trying to respond to the volunteers' demands.

Pausing for a minute, Myntti said: "Poetry on the walls is a good way to show that AUB cares about its neighborhood. We thought it would be more inspiring and pleasant to put Arabic quotes, and make people think about Beirut."

And think they did. Hourani recalled his time as an AUB student as he spotted Fairuz's "Min qalbi salamon li Beirut" on the wall. His son responded: "This is the thing, people in Beirut, in Lebanon, think with their hearts. In the US, they think with their wallets."

As sunset approached, passersby were seen taking pictures of the walls with their mobile phones; others were reading the quotes out loud, "La taghdab" (Don't be angry) and "Beirut ma bitmout (Beirut will never die)." While the former is found in a Hadith by Prophet Mohammad, the latter is taken from a song by Lebanese songstress Majida al-Roumi, underscoring the diversity of the selected quotes and sources.

The walls looked cleaner, which seemed unnatural to some students. Nadim Mohsen, a volunteer with CCECS, found that free painting without a unified background color would have been more interesting.

Hussein Abu Zeid, a Moroccan national who was passing by, was delighted. "[The wall] was disgusting. This is definitely the right move," he said.

Most participating students found the experience to be enriching. "We socialized, met new people and contributed to making our own community a better place," commented Karim Abu Jaoudeh, a Landscape Design major.

Students like Abu Jaoudeh are the main targets of CCECS. In fact, the center, which was established in 2007, aims to promote a sense of civic engagement among AUBites and spread a culture of giving back through community service activities. Nadim Mohsen and Hadi Fathallah, members of the CCECS student team, were present to coordinate the activity. They soon gave up their watchposts and grabbed paintbrushes to assist their fellow volunteers. At the end of the long-working day, students cleaned up the sidewalks and made sure not to leave any rubbish behind.

Tamim Bou Karroum, a Graphic Design student at AUL, was pleased with the new and improved state of the walls, but found the quotes irrelevant.

"They could have done something more interesting," he said.

Psychology student Khadija Mohammad believed the students were limited by Arabic quotes. "Why not add pictures and mix it with a little French or English? Lebanon is a multilingual country," she said.

Myntti described this initiative as a "temporary intervention," saying "maybe by tonight people will put graffiti on the same walls."

Although the night went by smoothly with no new graffiti in sight, a few owls were spotted a few days later hanging around the word "Beirut" on Abdel-Aziz Street. These stamped owl designs were not unfamiliar to Hamra walls which had their share of Umm Kalthoum and Mickey Mouse stamps.

Although life would be neater without graffiti, it would also be less interesting. The very title of the activity, "Al-Hitaan in Hakat," implies a never-ending conversation between the walls and passers-by.

The Neighborhood Initiative and CCECS would like to extend their appreciation to the many AUB administrative units which supported the event and contributed to its success. These include the Offices of Student Affairs, Information and Public Relations, and Protection; Facilities Planning and Design Unit; Physical Plant Department and AUBMC Plant Engineering. Our gratitude also goes to AUB faculty Mahmoud Chreih, Lina Ghaibeh, Bashshar Haydar, and Assaad Khairallah who provided valuable literary and technical assistance. Tinol was kind enough to donate the paint and provided much needed technical support. Finally, the Neighborhood Initiative and CCECS teams have worked incredibly and tirelessly to make this a success - many thanks to all.

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