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The Art Of Friendship: Solidifying Resettled Communities In Philadelphia

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The Art of Friendship: Solidifying Resettled Communities in Philadelphia

KATIE L. PRICE AND YAROUB AL-OBAIDI

Written by two unlikely friends, this article discusses a project, *Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary (FPS)*, that brought together professional book artists and recently resettled families from Syria and Iraq to co-create works together over the course of two years, and culminated in a series of exhibitions in Swarthmore, Philadelphia, and New York. Friendship and building intercultural relationships was at the heart of *FPS*, which we argue exemplifies the ways in which community-based, socially engaged art can function as a pathway to peace and social justice in local communities. The project, which formally ended in 2019, has had ripple effects in the resettled community of Philadelphia, and project collaborators continue to work closely together to promote peace in the City through arts and culture initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

On April 15, 2018, a group of twenty people—a few artists, a few Swarthmore College employees, and more than a few individuals who had resettled to Philadelphia from Syria and Iraq—gathered at the Parkway Central Library on Vine Street in Philadelphia.¹ Mark Strandquist and Courtney Bowles, working as the People’s Paper Co-op, had planned a workshop where the group would finalize a collaborative poem and resource guide they had been working on for the past several months. The day before the event was to take place, however, the United States and its allies launched a series of missiles into Syria. In response, the People’s Paper Co-op shifted their plans by inviting us to spend a few

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minutes writing letters expressing our feelings about the state of U.S.-Arab relations in the world. On the day of the planned event, we stood together in a circle and shared the letters we had written. As we started to share aloud the letters we had written to Bashar Al-Assad, President Trump, or others in power, we reached for each other's hands. Some voiced apologies on behalf of the U.S. government—"I'm so sorry for the things my country has done to yours." Others expressed feelings of retraumatization—"When will the destruction end?" Our grips tightened and we said, all together: friends, peace, sanctuary.

We—the authors of this article, both of whom were there that day—share this anecdote to illustrate the kind of community resilience that comes from building friendships across cultures, countries, and conflicts. At the People's Paper Co-Op event in 2018, what could have become a conversation full of anger, hate, and distrust, instead became a moment of solidarity and shared understanding. We believe in the potential of creative projects to build friendships that work to create a kind of resilient peace in local communities. The intersection of art and community building raises a number of interesting possibilities. How might art and creative practices contribute to building connections across differences? How can a group of tight knit friends influence a city? This article focuses on several activities that took place in Philadelphia since the height of the Syrian "refugee crisis" in 2016 to examine their potential for peacebuilding. Specifically, we are interested in how advocating for peace through social practice has contributed to fostering a sense of community for people who were resettled to Philadelphia from Iraq and Syria through a refugee program.

In what follows, we will highlight Swarthmore College's *Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary (FPS)* project,² which had community connections to two distinct but related projects, including *Radio Silence* and *Al-Mudhif—A Confluence*. Each project used art and creative practices to build community across differences in ways that enabled peace and understanding. We argue that these projects exemplify the possibilities of peace-building through friendship and suggest that the communities these projects have helped to cultivate have fundamentally changed peace efforts in the Philadelphia area through arts and culture.

MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS

In 2016, it was impossible not to turn on your television, check your social media, or read a newspaper article without hearing about "the refugee crisis." The image of Alan Kurdi, a 3 year old Syrian boy, lying

dead on the beach of the Mediterranean Sea on September 2, 2015 circulated globally as a powerful symbol of the cost of war and the dangers of attempting to seek refuge. In the U.S., the rhetoric surrounding migration and immigration was at a boiling point, most notably and consequentially in the presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2016 there were 65.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. This was twice the amount from 20 years before, and had increased by 2.3 million since 2015 alone. According to the then-current statistics, a person was forcibly displaced due to conflict or persecution every three seconds (UNHCR 2016, 2). As many others were thinking at the time, we asked: what can we do?

Swarthmore College is a small liberal arts college with a large commitment to peace. It is home to the Peace Collection, the most extensive research library and archive collection in the U.S. focusing solely on movements for peace around the world. It is also home to the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility, a center endowed in 2001 to, among other things, make “participatory citizenship and socially responsible action a nation-wide feature of higher education.” The Swarthmore College Libraries and the Lang Center emerged as natural partners to consider ways that the College could leverage its resources to contribute to a global problem by acting locally.

Just eight miles from Swarthmore, Philadelphia is home to two resettlement agencies: Nationalities Service Center (NSC) and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society—Pennsylvania (HIAS). In preparation for submitting a proposal to the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, one of the largest funders of arts and culture initiatives in the City, we reached out to NSC and HIAS to learn more about community needs and hopes. From them, we learned that being resettled to a new country is akin to winning the lottery. Globally, less than 1 percent of refugees are ever resettled, meaning that 99 percent are living in countries in which they have little to no rights or protections (see, for example, Parekh (2020) on the nearly insurmountable odds refugees face in seeking resettlement). Unlike the picture of refugees that were being painted by the media of the time—that they couldn’t be trusted, were a threat to “our” way of life, were liars and manipulators—we learned, in detail, the incredibly rigorous process that any displaced person must endure in order to even have the possibility of resettlement. And yet, for people who are resettled, problems continue. Resettlement agencies are charged with an impossible task: to support individuals in reaching self-sufficiency within ninety days of arrival. When we talked to them about our idea to connect individuals to Swarthmore’s archival materials in ways that would allow them to creatively respond to history by making books with artists, they immediately

suggested focusing on the Syrian and Iraqi community. The Iraqi community had been here for several years, and Syrians were just arriving. Most Arab countries have special markets and streets where the professions of printing, selling, and distributing books flourish—some with ancient roots—and many in the community already had skills related to calligraphy and interest in books as a form.

While situated in the larger context of the issue of global displacement, *FPS* ultimately received \$300,000 to work closely with 15 local families to address human needs that extend beyond food and shelter to a sense of purpose, dignity, and humanity. As Audre Lorde famously argues, “Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence” (Lorde 2007, 37). The project’s aims included increasing a sense of belonging (in a community, the City, and the country) for our project collaborators, and cultivating a sense of empathy for audiences (including the general public, resettlement organizations, policy makers, students and scholars of forced migration). The project met these goals through the creation of artworks—primarily book arts—that connected historical primary sources (archives) to current lived experiences and imagined futures. In the end, the project hosted over 20 art-making workshops facilitated by commissioned artists; held five exhibitions; created a fully bilingual (English/Arabic) catalog; executed events designed by project collaborators; and connected collaborators with art classes, skill shares, and other opportunities in the City. As a testament to the project’s success, the City of Philadelphia formally recognized its contributions via a City Resolution, executed on June 20, 2019, “for its work in providing Philadelphia-based Syrian and Iraqi residents a space to explore and share their experiences of migration, resilience, and refuge through the arts.” We were particularly moved by the Resolution calling out the ways in which *FPS* “interrogated the deep emotional and personal impact of Executive Order 13769, commonly referred to as ‘the Muslim ban’” (Philadelphia City Council 2019). The community that was formed as a result of this project became a kind of refuge with which we could, together, face challenges such as “the Muslim ban.”

WHERE THE LINES OF OUR HANDS MEET

Where the Lines of Our Hands Meet (2019)—an artists’ book by Mark Strandquist, Courtney Bowles, and *FPS* Collaborators—takes the hand as its point of departure. The paper itself was handmade by collaborators through a transformative process. Collaborators ripped newspaper clippings, handwritten personal experiences, and other documents



Figure 1. *Where the Lines of Our Hands Meet* on display at City Hall in Philadelphia in 2019. Photo Credit: Hussam Al-Obaidi.

that contained harmful language, such as xenophobia, cultural stereotypes, and language that articulated unwelcomeness. The scraps were then pulped and repurposed into new paper that would be formed into the final accordion book. Once dried and cut, images of collaborators' hands were superimposed on the paper, and a collaboratively written poem was printed on the paper and later hand-calligraphed, in Arabic, by project collaborator Abdul Karim Awad. When unfolded, the hands appear side-by-side, and the book extends beyond the length at which just one person could hold the book. When folded, the hands meet palm to palm (Figure 1). *Where the Lines of Our Hands Meet* is an invitation to contemplate our human connection, but in its process, it also points to the ways in which disconnection and misunderstanding can be overcome through collaborative making.

As a companion to this work, a resource guide of the same name was created “by those in resettlement, for those in resettlement.”³ The guide, which takes the form of a newspaper-sized, eight-page booklet, contains a glossary of terms that collaborators on the project had wished they had understood upon arrival in the United States; the same collaboratively written poem that appears in the artists' book, both in English and Arabic; personal stories of how individuals overcame the challenges of

resettlement; and an invitation to write down what they have learned to help them navigate a new city. The opening page describes the guide's intention:

This book is not just a resource guide, it's informed by experiences we went through when we came to the USA. It's interactions with other people. The result of our time working together as a family, sharing our personal stories and the mistakes we made, so hopefully you will be able to avoid them and thrive. [...]

When you finish reading it, we want you to remember that you aren't alone. We've been through it too. This guide for those in resettlement was created by us, BY others in resettlement. There will be times when it will be hard (the first day was particularly scary), but there will also be so many moments of beauty and happiness. Do not give up. Remember what you left behind. Forget the things that scare you, but carry power and resiliency with you. You can ask for help. You will find new community and friends. You are not alone. We are here too. Look for us and find your way in this new place (Bowles and Stradquist et al. 2018).

We share this excerpt at length for the ways in which it illustrates that those who have been through resettlement keenly recognize the importance of friendship as a pathway to peace. When asked what the collaborators would most like to share with newcomers, the “interactions with other people,” “sharing our personal stories,” and the invitation to “find new community and friends” came to the forefront as a necessary aspect of finding peace after war.

WHAT WAR DIVIDED, RIVERS UNITE

In 2017, Yaroub Al-Obaidi, the *FPS* project's community liaison made a surprising discovery while working on the *Radio Silence* project with Iraqi American artist Michael Rakowitz: Lawrence Davidson, a U.S. veteran also involved in the project, had been stationed in his hometown just outside Baghdad, Iraq when he still lived there. Through their conversations, they learned that Davidson was a member of the engineering group that had helped rebuild a bridge there, over the Diayla River. In 2019, they collaborated through the Warrior Writers digital stories project to create “The Bridge,” a three-minute, publicly available video that recounts their unlikely meeting and the discovery that they both had been in the same town in Iraq and the same time. The video highlights the

concept of Mesopotamia as a land of 2 rivers and Philadelphia as a mid-sized city in the northwest part of the US with two rivers (the Delaware and the Schuylkill). As is narrated in the video, “when people meet and start their friendship, it is like building a bridge to cross the river.”

Another project collaborator, Mohamed Okab, found similar resonances and articulated them in his prose poem, “Between Algraf [Al Gharraf] and Delaware River.” This bilingual work appears in *Yes to Hope* (2018), a self-published, collaborative book made during a series of workshops led by book artist Maureen Cummins. The title was chosen by contributor consensus, and the cover was letterpressed by collaborators at Second State Press in Philadelphia using a custom plate (Figure 2). Iraqi by birth, Okab came to the United States via resettlement after working as a bookseller on Al-Mutanabbi Street, the famed book market and cultural hub of Baghdad. On March 5, 2007 the street was bombed, killing over twenty people, injuring hundreds, and decimating the historic market. In his prose poem, Okab recalls being born by a river, working near a river (on Al-Mutanabbi Street), and ultimately finding himself back near a river (the Delaware). Written originally in Arabic, and self-translated with the assistance of Katie Price, co-director of the project, the poem formally echoes the content, with the English and the Arabic situated on the page so that they are moving toward one other, toward the center fold, aptly called “the gutter” of the book (Figure 3).

Anyone can read news about the bombing of Al-Mutanabbi Street that sought to destroy culture, but to hear from a person who was an eyewitness has the potential to leave a more powerful impact. The memoirs and qualifications of Mohamed Okab enabled him to be an effective collaborator in *FPS* through his way of writing about his memories on Al-Mutanabbi Street. In addition to these important notes, one of Mohamed’s talents was drawing, which he did not practice for many years due to the difficult circumstances he faced in his life. The project was an important opportunity for Mohamed to return to drawing by providing lessons and joining a group interested in drawing, and this helped him return to his talent.

Through these projects, we came to a new definition of the term “engagement,” discovered new elements, and shared them with professionals. We believe effective communication is helpful to understand the differences between communities, cultures, and languages. Collaborators too recognized the importance of continuing dialog, inviting others into conversations, and sharing publicly their culture and their stories. From research, collaborators learned that Philadelphia was home to the first Arabic newspaper in the U.S., *Al-Hoda*, founded in 1898. After the project formally ended in 2019, collaborators decided to continue the project



Figure 2. Custom letterpress plate used to print the title on covers of *Yes to Hope!* (2018). Photo credit: Hussam Al-Obaidi.

by founding a new Arabic newspaper in Philadelphia to be a forum for the Arabic community and engage with people who want to learn more about the Arabic language, culture, and food — everything related to our community in Philadelphia.⁴ Collaborators chose to retain the project name for the newspaper, and the first issue of the *Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary Journal* came out in May 2020.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDINGS

In 2021, *Al-mudhif* (a traditional Iraqi guesthouse made of reeds) was built at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education in Philadelphia. The project, *Al Mudhif—A Confluence* was led by environmental artist Sarah Kavage and collaborating artist Yaroub Al-Obaidi and brought individuals—primarily U.S. veterans and Iraqis, but also local high school students—together to construct *Al-mudhif*. Working together, they bent reeds and tied them together to create a strong and sustainable structure in which people could meet for tea and conversation. In socially engaged art, people themselves are part of the work. When the community becomes a part of the construction of any artistic work, that is, the community is the target and means for the artistic work at the same time, this

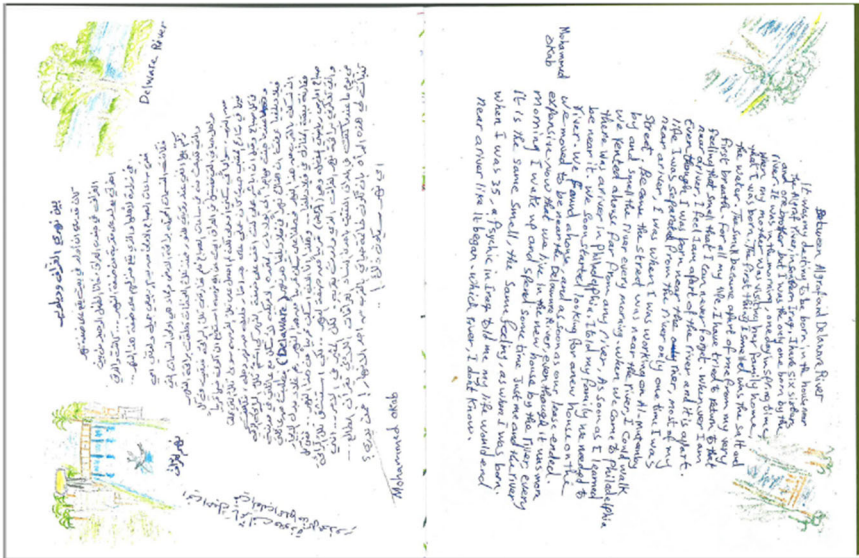


Figure 3. Mohamed Okab, “Between Algraf and Delaware River,” from *Yes to Hope!*, ed. Maureen Cummins. (2018).



Figure 4. The inside of *Al-mudhif*, which was made entirely by hand by community members. Photo credit: Robert Zverina.

is when an artwork can contribute most to peace-building (Figure 4). The process of building *Al-mudhif* is as important to an understanding of the work as the structure itself. The project allowed for participants to truly become part of the work, as much physically as emotionally. Some art



Figure 5. Artist Sarah Kavage serves tea to guests during a tea ceremony *Al-mudhif*. Photo credit: Robert Zverina.

projects face challenges when they try to engage communities and communication breaks down, but *Al-Mudhif—A Confluence* did not face these challenges as there was an enthusiasm and sense of belonging that only grew as people worked together on the project. In addition to all the stories that accompanied the construction of *Al-mudhif* and the activities that followed it—including a reconciliation and healing event on the 20th anniversary of 9/11—we can say that we delivered an important message, among them the messages related to the material itself, represented by reeds as a material available thousands of years ago in building the early villages. As for the other level of messages, they are social artistic messages, represented by the process of building bridges of communication and benefiting from the power of art to be a source of strength for society, and this helped build a solid, understanding, and cooperative society.

On June 24, 2021, *Al-Mudhif—A Confluence* held its opening event. It was the first time that the *FPS* collaborators and project team had seen each other since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. Meeting in the Iraqi guesthouse together reinforced for us the idea that relationship-building was fundamental to continued local peace efforts (Figure 5). Over the course of these projects, we communicated frequently with the collaborators and became close to them, hearing their stories, and understanding their feelings. Though we translated across languages in speech and

writing, the translation of feelings and thoughts was the most important. Through these projects, a true community formed and the people, connected to each other, were extremely happy while working. The time they spent in the workshops and interacting with the artists and the project community was at the top of what they aspired to since their arrival to the United States of America, one of their goals to be effective and find someone to listen to their stories and this was an important factor in the process of interaction and a sense of belonging to the city in which they were settled.

CONCLUSION

One of the main issues facing artists as peacemakers is the process of building bridges of communication and peace between people from different societies, cultures, and perspectives. Media often propagates ideas around a lack of acceptance and misunderstanding and often focuses on political topics that are divisive. This is because some politicians live on planting the seeds of division between people and creating a foggy situation that is a useful space for them to present their views.

What societies need is a place that brings together the contradictory parties to find that they are not contradictory, but rather interconnected, separated only by an imaginary line in their minds, a place that provides a fertile ground for exploring the similarities in the other and transcending the contradictions. Society needs artists who can provide us with important opportunities to explore others. *Radio Silence; Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary*; and *Al-Mudhif—A Confluence* are all such projects and created experiences that had an important impact on the hearts of their participants and visitors. Through witnessing and participating in these projects, our conviction that art has significant power in our communities has been strengthened. Socially engaged, community-based art offers opportunities to build healthy and useful dialogue, and this is the most important factor in changing convictions and building common convictions.

Returning to the anecdote that began this article, the moment in which we took each other's hands and chanted "friends, peace, sanctuary," we were making a commitment: to each other, our communities, and to the world. Our friendship and the bonds that we formed across political opinions, culture, and even language, gave us the resilience to respond to news of war in ways that strengthened our commitments to peace when they could have led to further discord and misunderstanding. Through "the Muslim ban" of 2017, the U.S. strikes on

Syria in 2018, the Covid-19 pandemic, the 20th anniversary of 9/11, and through the current atrocities being committed in Ukraine and a new “refugee crisis,” writing, cooking, making, and talking together allowed us to form strong long-term friendships that have contributed to a kind of resilient peace in Philadelphia. In the words of one of our collaborators (paraphrased from the original Arabic): “this project helped me realize that sanctuary is more than safety; it is to be in a place among people where you can be and share who you truly are.” This sentiment resonates with us, particularly in the context of this special issue, for the way in which it so clearly states that for those who have experienced resettlement, the opposite of war is not peace, but friendship.

NOTES

1. We would like to thank all of the artists and staff who worked with us on *Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary*. Our deepest gratitude goes to the project collaborators—Fadaa Ali, Abir AlArnab, Layla Al Hussein, Roula Al Jabi, Samah Al-Kasab, Amaal Alnajjar, Abdul Karim Awad, Asmaa Diab, Osama Herkal, Fouad Sakhnini, Ali Salman, Raghad Samir, Fadia, Marwa, and Mohamed Okab—whose friendship means everything to us. We would also like to thank Michael Goode, who generously offered feedback on this article.
2. Major support for *Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary* has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, with additional support from the William J. Cooper Foundation, Swarthmore College Libraries, the Lang Center for Civic & Social Responsibility, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Now retired Swarthmore College Librarian Peggy Seiden served as project director and principal investigator of the grant; Katie Price as co-director; Suzanne Seesman as artistic director; Nora Elmarzouky as project manager; and Yaroub Al-Obaidi as community liaison.
3. *Where the Lines of Our Hands Meet (Resource Guide)* was a collaborative effort led by Courtney Bowles and Mark Strandquist in collaboration with Abdul Karim Awad, Abir AlArnab, Asmaa Diab, Fadaa Ali, Fouad Sakhnini, Layla Al Hussein, Marwa, Mohamed, Osama Herkal, Raghad Samir, Roula Al-Jabi, their families, and multiple other people who wish to remain anonymous. Guide translations provided by Tamim Arabi, Yaroub Al-Obaidi, and Nationalities Service Center. Poem translation provided by Dana Beseiso with edits from Adam Amin. Graphic Design by Jason Killinger.
4. On July 5, 2020, Ximena Conde wrote an article for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* detailing the history of *Al Hoda* and the launch of the *Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary Journal*. The article is titled “Philly gets first Arabic newspaper in 118 years thanks to Friends, Peace, and Sanctuary.”

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Awad, Abdul Karim, Abir AlArnab, Asmaa Diab, Fadaa Ali, Fouad Sakhnini, Layla Al Hussein, Marwa, Mohamed, Osama Herkal, Raghad Samir, Roula Al-Jabi, et al. 2018. *Where the Lines of Our Hands Meet: Resources Created by Those in Resettlement for Those in Resettlement*. Philadelphia, PA: People's Paper Co-Op.
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