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by LIZ PAGE

Rebuilding and Developing Public School Libraries in Beirut

Partnering with the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Beirut, our mission as the Lebanese Board on Books for Young People (LBBY) to promote reading and connection between children and books was achieved by initiating a program that aims to help renovate damaged libraries at public schools and enhance them with needed books. In addition, we developed a training program with the help of Assabil, a nongovernmental organization founded in 1997 to promote reading and free access to culture by creating public libraries as nonsectarian and open spaces for cultural exchange as well as providing access to information and reading. This program trains selected teachers and librarians on library management as well as the inclusion of books in their curriculum.

Reading to people of young age has been known to aid in the growth of their minds by the creation of mental processes, including memory, problem solving, and decision-making. This contributes to their information processing, comprehension, rationality, language development, concentration, and memory. This is done by the boost of cognitive skills and aid in cognitive development, which impact the child from early childhood through adolescence to maturity.

Lebanon is a country bordering the Mediterranean Sea, with its population mostly living in the coastal cities of Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon. It is well known for hosting a large number of refugees, primarily Syrians—estimated at 1.5 million people, which is the highest population-to-refugee ratio globally. In addition, there are also nearly 200,000 Palestinian refugees who fled to Lebanon to escape conflict. Consequently, the various crises in Lebanon affect not just the Lebanese population but also the refugees.

On August 4, 2020, an enormous warehouse explosion in Beirut caused catastrophic damage throughout the city. This was truly a disastrous day in the life of Lebanese people. More than 120 schools were impacted, and plans were set to rebuild what had been destroyed. In partnership with UNESCO, LBBY worked to compensate for the damages to libraries and all related activities.

The targets were the public schools, since they host a large number of Lebanese and non-Lebanese students; moreover, they were already in need of library development. An assessment was made of every school, as each lacked specific resources. The local community was engaged in the planning and implementation, and they also had a say in decisions.

A steady and efficient goal of bringing children and books together was implemented and maintained throughout the process. Funds were secured from different communities internationally, such as the main IBBY Children in Crisis Fund, UNESCO partners, Book Aid International, IBBY Canada, IBBY Netherlands, Collectif De Bibliothecaires Et Intervenent

En Action Culturelle (COBIAC), and the Bibliotheque Nationale De France (BNF) through IBBY France.

To achieve such a goal, objectives were put in place. The objectives in question were to develop children's personal values using children's books, develop children's academic values, train teachers to support children and use children's literature in their lesson plans, train librarians on classification and library management and promotion, train teachers and librarians on bibliotherapy in order to work with children to get over their trauma, and provide bibliotherapy manuals and instructions.

The plan was split into two phases. The first included the beginning steps: assessing damage, establishing the budget, performing an analysis for each respective school, organizing resources for each school, and finally distributing books.

After the first funding was acquired in August and September 2020, a selection of schools to be contacted and visited was presented to the IBBY Executive Committee for approval of funds and approval of the collaboration with the UNESCO office in Beirut. Around that time, a letter was sent to IBBY National Sections around the world asking them to support LBBY with books and funds.

More than 18,000 books were donated to the project by Book Aid International, IBBY Canada, LBBY, COBIAC, and the BNF.

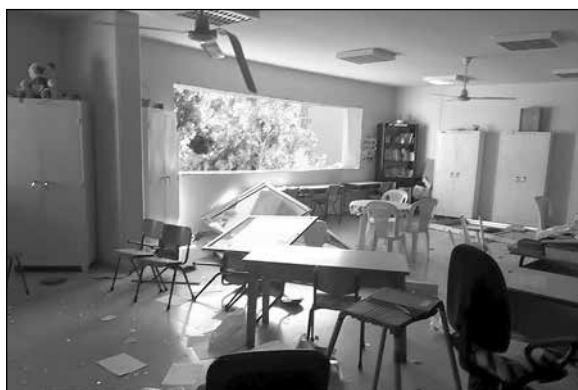
To assess the damage, LBBY and UNESCO visited the schools. They found shattered windows and doors, as well as the destruction of desks, chairs, and the few books available. LBBY and UNESCO were also made aware of the scarcity of finances and the stress that befell the staff and administration. This assessment was done to create maximum efficiency in the following steps as each school was unique in its portfolio.

A budget was drawn up with a range between USD 3,000 and USD 15,000 to rebuild each library, depending on the needs of each school.

Schools were chosen based on how affected they were by the explosion, the cooperativeness of the principal, the availability of a librarian, their willingness to engage in training, the need to cover different areas in Beirut as well

as to accommodate the different religious communities and languages, the availability of a room to set aside as a library, how much damage was reversible given our funds, and the number of students that would benefit.

Although each case was different, a standard design was considered. For example, the colors of the shelves in the new libraries were always designed in a way to match the colors of the doors and walls in the host schools. This was done because there is clear evidence that colors may have a variety of effects on humans, including producing excitement, offering calmness, supporting inspiration, raising tension or pressure, and providing peace. Vinyl flooring was deemed appropriate for children to sit on as they read.



Al Alia school just after the blast

Low pouffes, made of leather, were manufactured for early elementary and preschool classes. Additionally, tables were provided that can both be dispersed into single units and combined to form one large surface, depending on the use of the library. If a librarian was present, a table and a comfortable chair for them was also provided.

This project not only provided renovation but also training for staff, such as librarians and teachers, on how to use the library, how to use the books, the system of filing, and bibliotherapy. Each library was allotted around twenty to forty days of work, depending on the processes needed and the accessibility of the premises. The distribution and allocation of books was often dependent on the school, the number and age of students enrolled, and the teaching language.

The second phase of the project was entitled “Training Program and Data Entry for Lebanese Public School Libraries.” The project aimed to help these libraries set up a cataloging system and train a librarian or any designated teacher on library management and reading promotion. The schools were also encouraged to include literature books in the curriculum to enhance children’s connection with literature, rather than keeping these books “hidden” on shelves to be disregarded. By the end of this phase, the selected teachers or librarians were invited to attend a training session on the usage of bibliotherapy; they were also given useful manuals.

This phase included the training program SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats)—involving analysis, evaluation of outcomes, and conclusions. The training session included various aspects such as teaching Excel, library classification, library promotion, and management.

To organize and run the sessions, different trainers provided sessions about each of the topics. The sessions were scheduled over five days. All public schools were provided with appropriate books and given access to proper training. However, due to staff shortages, most did not have time to attend. Those schools that did not have a librarian were asked to provide someone that they would like to be trained and have manage their libraries later on. That is why we also provided a team of university students, supervised by an expert from Assabil, to help schools place the documented books on the shelves.

A SWOT analysis was conducted to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of this project to aid in future ventures and to help improve this project. Another analysis was conducted to assess



Al Alia school after renovation



Achrafieh Third Public School after renovations

the level of achievement of the project's objectives, as well as its development, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. This included following up with the schools and using their experiences to evaluate the process. Each school was revisited and a meeting was held with the principal in order to gain feedback on the services provided and hear any comments or worries they may have. The school principals were satisfied, especially as transparency was shown from the beginning. Everything promised was provided and the books were suitable for the age groups of each school selection.

The evaluation reflected on both the first phase of the project for trainees and the second phase, as they were asked to write an evaluation letter at the end of the training program.



Al Shahid Aadan Hiibaw after renovation

Libraries serve an important role in providing people with trustworthy information. They support and enable both literacy development and knowledge acquisition. The more a library is supplied with a variety of books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, and manuscripts, the more it encompasses information.

This project's assessment has shown that Lebanese public school libraries lacked a diversity of books, which is known to harm children's interests. In today's generation, when one's life is tethered to technology, it is undeniable that many children and teenagers have lost their connection to books. For this reason,

LBBY partnered with UNESCO to enhance Lebanese school libraries in public schools. This project took careful consideration of how to listen to, empower, and strengthen the community being targeted, rather than giving false promises or assuming their needs. When schools understand that a project's aim is to work with them, to provide what is best for them, it motivates such institutions to work harder.

The increase of interest in libraries for future generations, and the inclusion of books in the Lebanese curriculum, inspires positive changes in the Lebanese educational system.

Shereen Kreidieh
President of IBBY Lebanon (LBBY)

Michael O'Brien, July 4, 1941-July 31, 2022

"In Michael's memory, read a good book"

At the funeral service for Michael O'Brien, founder of Dublin's O'Brien Press, the president of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, spoke warmly of Michael's publishing and community activist contributions. "I will always remember his loyalty to the book, to the making of books and the reading of books, and to how the book is never a mere commodity," he said.

Michael founded the press in 1974 with his socialist poet father, Thomas, who had fought in the Spanish Civil War. In an interview in 2014, Michael explained that he had decided to create a new native literature for Irish

children that did not previously exist. This was a key decision and one he fulfilled with brilliance and international success. With new authors such as Siobhán Parkinson, Eoin Colfer, Paul Howard, Judi Curtin, and Marita Conlon-McKenna, famous for her *Under the Hawthorne Tree* trilogy, the press quickly established itself. Michael's eldest son, Ivan, has been running O'Brien Press in recent years.

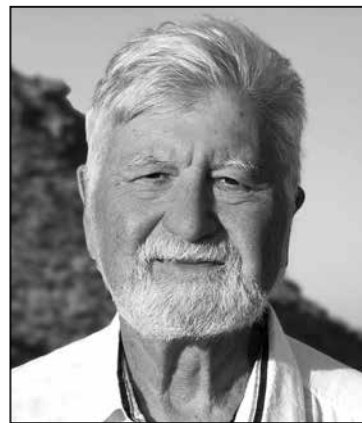
Well respected internationally, and a multi-award recipient, Michael first attended the principal international bookfairs in the mid-1970s, especially in Frankfurt, in Bologna, and across America. His involvement with IBBY Ireland and IBBY international conferences was important; he was awarded IBBY Ireland's Annual Award in 2016. Michael was a notable promoter of the establishment of IBBY Palestine in 2002. He believed in equality and practiced it. He was publisher, activist, artist, and sailor.

The Irish Arts Council Literature Manager Audrey Keane said: "Michael O'Brien...worked tirelessly and with unswerving dedication and commitment and his influence in the area of Irish publishing for children in particular leaves a lasting legacy."

A contemporary of Michael's, I established Wolfhound Press also in 1974. We often competed and often cooperated—on design, on sales, on industry issues, and on international projects—and I agree with fellow publisher Anthony Farrell's remark: "His cyclonic energy transformed our world, seeding the arid landscape of the late 1970s and 1980s and beyond with his roster of authors and publications."

Words repeated by different speakers throughout Michael's funeral service validly reflect the man's publishing acumen and his character: courage, imagination, instinct, dynamism, persistence, strategy, purpose.

*Seamus Cashman
IBBY Ireland*



Michael O'Brien

Looking Back

Twenty-five years ago, I wandered into the IBBY secretariat at the invitation of Leena Maissen, the then executive director. IBBY needed a new assistant at the office and Leena knew that I was free and could read and write in English. I have been working in the small office in Nonnenweg in Basel ever since.

The growth of IBBY over these years has been astounding. When I joined IBBY, it had sixty-one National Sections, and since then, this has grown to eighty! In 1997, IBBY had just introduced email to its communications, which changed the pace of work in the Secretariat enormously. The next year, IBBY launched its own website, and now we have social media platforms to help spread information about IBBY members and children's literature.

To my mind, one event dramatically changed the course of IBBY. At the end of 2004, a very large tsunami swept through the Indian Ocean, causing huge damage in the region and a great loss of life. IBBY set up the Tsunami Fund and was extremely fortunate to attract funding from Hideo Yamada in Japan. IBBY funded reading and bibliotherapy projects

in Indonesia, India, and Thailand. A year later, IBBY launched the IBBY-Yamada Fund to provide funds for IBBY members to develop book cultures in all regions of the world. Since 2005, the Yamada Bee Farm has generously supported this fund and brought books and reading to thousands of children around the world. The IBBY Children in Crisis program also dates from this beginning, supporting children whose lives have been disrupted by war, civil unrest, or natural disasters. For me, these are two gems of IBBY's work as they directly link children to books and reading. I have been fortunate to visit many of these projects around the world, and I am forever impressed by IBBY members and their commitment to bringing children and books together.

The reading promotion awards have also grown and continue to identify outstanding projects and people. It has been a real privilege to get to know these impressive individuals and their projects. IBBY has the most generous of sponsors, who are not only dedicated to IBBY's mission, but are also delightful to work with.

I also want to thank all the members of the Executive Committee with whom I have worked over the years, especially the IBBY presidents, who share the conviction that every child has the right to become a reader and have brought their individual vision to IBBY, moving it ever forward and making it a real force in the global promotion of reading. Working closely with the Hans Christian Andersen Award juries and presidents has given insights into the work of some of the greatest creators of books for children. I could go on and mention all the congresses, regional meetings, book fairs, festivals, and visits that I have made to different sections—all of which have been fabulous. My initiation into the world of IBBY was of course through Leena Maissen, who taught me so much, for which I am truly grateful. And I extend my deepest thanks to all who have worked at the "blue house" on Nonnenweg—we made a small but effective team.

What makes working for IBBY such a joy is its wonderful members and supporters everywhere. Thank you to everyone for making my life so much richer.

Liz Page



Liz Page was born in Britain and moved with her family to Heidelberg, Germany, in 1983. After nearly two years they left Germany and settled in Basel, Switzerland. Through her interest in children and books, Liz helped to establish the Intercultural Children's Library in Basel—JUKIBU, which opened in 1990. She was a member of the managing board with responsibility for the day-to-day running of the library for the first years and was elected president of the Intercultural Children's Libraries Association of Switzerland, now called INTERBIBLIO. She joined IBBY as assistant to the executive director in 1997 and in 2009 was appointed executive director.