

Address by Laila AlShekh and Robi Damelin

Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF)

2023 Cutting Edge of Mission Award Recipients

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St. Mary's University, Halifax, NS

Laila AlShekh

Good morning. First of all, I want to thank you for inviting us. It is an honour for us to be here with you, to share with you, and to speak about our work.

My name is Laila AlShekh. I am from Bethlehem, Palestine. I am a Muslim Palestinian mother. I have five children. I was born and raised in Jordan but went back to Bethlehem in 1999 to get married and to start my new life there.

After we had our two children, and after we thought that life had become so good and that everything will be okay, that happiness was ended on the 11th of April 2002 at 4 o'clock in the morning when my son, at that time 6 months old, woke up in very critical condition because that night the Israeli soldiers came to our village and threw tear gas. Because he was too young, his lungs couldn't tolerate it. We tried to take him to a hospital inside Bethlehem, because we live inside a village, but the Israeli soldiers prevented us. They said it is a military zone and you can't enter. We tried to take him to Hebron, the next city to Bethlehem, but again, they stopped us and said the main road is closed. Our last chance was to take him to Hebron but we had to take a rough and long road between villages. For the third time they stopped us, for more than four hours. When we finally got to the hospital the doctors said it was too late to save his life. At the end of that day, he died.

That was so hard for me. Our life became upside down. Everything was changed from that day. I was filled with hatred and anger against all the Israelis because, for me, all of them were responsible for my son's death. At the same time, I did not think to take revenge because revenge for me would never bring my son back.

Sixteen years later, I met one of my friends who participated in one of the programs of the Parents Circle. He convinced me to attend. In the beginning, I wasn't really so convinced about attending but one day he invited me to a conference in Bethlehem for the Parents Circle and it was the first time I heard the Israelis speak about their personal stories and how they lost their beloved ones. I was really touched and moved because for me as a Palestinian I saw just settlers or soldiers but to meet other women who lost their beloved ones, that was a first time. That day I felt that we share the same tears, we share the same pain, even if we had different circumstances. Nothing is worse than losing a child. No one could understand that pain unless someone would be in the same situation. From that day, I decided to participate in one of the programs called Family Forum. That may be the most important program in the organization. It gives a chance for both sides to sit, to listen, and to speak about everything. That was the first time I spoke about what happened to my son. Even between me and my husband we didn't speak about what happened. That was so hard for me. It is like opening the wound again, bringing back the pain, the memories, everything comes back. I couldn't complete the story.

Then an Israeli woman came and started to apologize. She said, "I didn't hurt you but the people who hurt you are from my own people and I'm a mother too and I could understand your pain. I could understand the words you couldn't say." And she came and hugged me. Both of us started to cry. She didn't know that by her simple words she changed my whole life. From that day I decided to be a member in the Forum, started to lecture inside Israel, Palestine, travel around the world to spread the message of peace and reconciliation. It was so easy for me to speak about that because we spoke from our heart. We spoke about our life and our experience.

I thought everything will be good and everything will go well. But, before four months in Jerusalem, life gave me a new test. We were in Jerusalem and there was a big conference for all other organizations. After me and Robi spoke about our stories, there was a man who stood up and started to talk about his story. I knew that man before, but I hadn't heard his story before. He mentioned that he served in the army in my area and he mentioned that he prevented a Palestinian car with sick children from going to the hospital. Then it became so hard for me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't do anything. It was like a storm happening in my head. I didn't know what to think. Robi asked both of us to go outside to talk about what happened.

He said that this is so important for me to tell you about. I know this is hard. Then he started to mention that his son became so sick and when he tried to take him to a hospital the guards stopped him because they wanted to ask him many questions. He said, "Then I realized what I did to the Palestinian." From that day, he quit the army. He was a high officer. He established a new organization. He started to work with ex-Palestinian fighters to start to end this occupation. I looked at him and said it was so hard for me to hear that and that my whole life I did not think I would be in front of one of you. At the same time, I want to thank you because if I know that part of your story exists and you didn't tell me, I would never forgive you about that. Because you have been so honest and have the courage to tell me the truth, I will forgive you. And he has become one of my best friends now.

This is real reconciliation. This is when I really believe that I meant every word I said. I meant everything I did. And this has given me much more power to continue because we can't lose hope even in this dark time in Palestine and Israel. Every day we lose a new life. So, what we are doing, we want to end this occupation because we are the people who suffer every day from this occupation. Every day we lose one of our beloved ones. Until now, every day when someone knocks on my door or I receive a phone call, I pray that I do not want to hear that news again. I am not ready to lose another one. Because of that, we continue this work. Because of that, I am here today sharing with you my story. Thank you so much for listening.

Robi Damelin

These are very dark times in my country. I cannot remember a time when the work that we are doing is threatened, when the summer camp that we are planning in July has been threatened to stop, when they are trying to stop us from going into schools to do dialogue meetings. But we cannot and will not give up hope because hope is a very important equation in peace. If you have no hope, there will never be peace. When the army came to tell me that my son David had been killed by a Palestinian sniper, one of the first things that I said was, "You may not kill anybody in the name of my child." That was something like the beginning of what I was going to do with my life. I wanted to prevent other

mothers, both Palestinian and Israeli, from experiencing this pain – because there is no other pain as bad as losing a child. And for what? And for what?

A religious Jewish man came to talk to me and invited me to go to a weekend in East Jerusalem to meet Palestinian and Israeli bereaved families. When I went, I was sitting around a table and I looked into the eyes of the Palestinian mothers and I realized that we shared the same pain and that if we could stand up together and talk about reconciliation and non-violence, wouldn't that be an extreme example for the rest of the world. So, I started to travel all over the world with the Palestinian partner. I can't even remember the countries that I've been to. I spoke in Parliament, in your Parliament, in London. I spoke wherever I could, in a hip-hop concert (it was a very good hop-hop concert). Wherever I was invited, I went to speak. (By the way, the Palestinians reckon that if the Hamas will kidnap me they'll give me back after three hours because I talk so much.) This weekend really changed my life. I was very pleased with myself. I could speak English albeit with a South African accent because that is where I came from originally. One night, I came home from a trip and there was another knock on my door. I opened the door and there were three soldiers standing there. When there are three soldiers, it can only mean one thing. So I slammed the door in their face. They kept knocking and knocking and knocking. Eventually, I opened the door. They said, "We came to tell you that we caught the man who killed David." That's when it became difficult. You see, you can talk about peace and love and all of these lovely things, but do you really mean it? Do you mean it?

It took me three months and I wrote a letter to the parents of the sniper who killed David. I realized very early that one Palestinian killed my child, not the whole Palestinian nation. I told them about David. He was a student at Tel Aviv University, and he was studying for his Masters in the philosophy of education. He was part of the peace movement. And for what? I also said that we should meet. That was probably my South African background, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I am not the most patient character in the Middle East. I imagined that immediately I would get a letter back from Fire, that's the name of the sniper. It took three years. He wrote to me over a website and said that I'm crazy -- I already knew that – and that I should stay away from his family and that he killed 10 people to free Palestine. But, you see, I knew that when he was a little boy, he saw his uncle violently killed by the Israeli Army and he lost two uncles in the second uprising. I think he acted from a place of revenge. That, for me, was another turning point, when I got that letter. It freed me. You see, I gave up being a victim. I am not a victim; I am a victor. And that is extraordinary.

This freedom I felt going back to South Africa and meeting people who had given evidence in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and realizing what is the meaning of forgiving – each of us sees it differently. I met this woman whose daughter was killed. She was Afrikaans. She had gone to the Commission and said, "I forgive you," to the men who killed her daughter. I asked her what her definition of forgiving was. She said, "For me, forgiving is giving up your just right to revenge." Then I met the man who actually sent the people who killed her daughter and he said, "By her forgiving me, she released me from the prison of my inhumanity." I thought that was the most extraordinary statement. So, I came back to Israel trying to meet. I want to say that again: "By her forgiving me, she released me from the prison of my inhumanity." I came back to Israel and I wanted to meet with the sniper but, unfortunately, I was prevented by various governments from speaking to the sniper that killed my son.

Now Laila and I are two people who represent 600 families. Each one of those families could stand here and tell you a story and keep you enthralled and understanding that it is possible to change, what is transformation. All of the work that we are doing on the ground is because the vision is to create a framework for a reconciliation process to be an integral part of any political future peace agreement. We've actually signed all kinds of papers on the White House lawn but if we don't have the people involved, it will just be a ceasefire until the next time. So, we continue to work, as dark as it is. And to thank you all for sitting here and listening with empathy. And also for the prize. Thank you so much. It will go towards the work that we do in the parallel narrative course in the women's group.

Maybe I'll just tell you one little thing. We wanted to do something so that the Palestinian women would feel self-esteem. You know it is very difficult to work for peace if you don't have money to put on the table for food and for education. One Saturday morning, I came to meet the Palestinian women because they have known me for so many years. It is above the conflict. I asked them what their passion was. Each one had something. One wanted to do hair. One wanted photography. One wanted nails. You can't imagine how many things: sweets, cakes, food. So, we opened a wedding planning business and each of the 40 women went to be trained in their profession. They are already earning money. There are joyous moments in this very dark time and we have to look for them.

Thank you.