
Palestinian girls take science project from UN school to Silicon Valley

28 April 2010 – Three teenagers studying in a United Nations-funded school in a refugee camp in the West Bank have been chosen to join 1,500 finalists, Nobel Laureates and leading scientific minds in the world's largest pre-college science fair where their prototype of an electric cane could win a \$50,000 grand prize.

"They are the Albert Einsteins of tomorrow," the UN News Centre was told today by Chris Gunness, spokesperson for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the agency that provides basic services to about 4.7 million registered refugees.

"In the male-dominated world of science, for three refugee girls to find recognition on the international stage is incredible," Mr. Gunness said.

Asil Shaar, Nour Al-Arda and Asil Abu Lil, all aged 14, teamed up for a science project at UNRWA's Askar Girls' School in Nablus, north of Jerusalem, after seeing one of their visually impaired uncles struggle to walk on the region's hilly terrain.

While most electronic canes can tell what is in front, the girls devised a wooden walking stick that has a "seeing" sensor below – so it beeps when the surface changes, such as near stairs, holes or water, up to 30 inches away.

To perfect their prototype, the girls also visited organizations that work with visually impaired people and scoured electronic stores that were some 45 minutes and two Israeli checkpoints away from their homes.

The idea was nurtured at the UNRWA school by the girls and their teacher, Jameela Khaled, who said she felt like she had planted a tree and "now I take the fruit."

The girls' cane was chosen out of 56 Palestinian projects to attend next month's Intel International Science and Engineering Fair in San Jose, California, where they will meet with hundreds of leading scientists and researchers, and potential future employers.

"Intel and UNRWA both believe that if you empower the next generation, they will be able to meet any global challenge. Teaching children to think about problems rationally and creatively is an important contribution to peace and stability in the Middle East," said Mr. Gunness, adding that the girls are among the first Palestinians to take part in the fair.

The girls' selection to attend the Intel fair was bittersweet. There was only enough money to send two of the girls. The three flipped a coin, agreeing to leave Ms. Shaar behind.

Calling it "crazy" that all three could not attend, UNRWA staff began a collection and raised enough money to send Ms. Shaar as well. The good news was announced yesterday to the girls' classroom, amid tears and lots of hugging.

"I was happy for my friends, but I was also very sad. I'm very happy now because I'm going to represent UNRWA in California and go with my friends and teacher," Ms. Shaar told the UN News Centre by telephone.

"I am most excited about seeing our project in the contest with all the others. Everyone here is supporting us. I hope to come back with a win."

The girls are now in the process of getting their paperwork. For two of them, this will be the first time to leave the West Bank.

"Everyone concerned has really pulled together, UNRWA, the parents, also the American consulate in Jerusalem," Mr. Gunness said.