

Jerusalem Post > World News

Israelis, Palestinians build start-ups together at Brandeis incubator

'In order to have trust, you need to get to know each other'

By SHARON UDASIN JUNE 11, 2017 03:59



Noam Mordechay, co-chairman of an alumni group of a Boston-based Israeli- Palestinian startup incubator, speaks at a Jerusalem event

(photo credit: RANA ABU-FRAIHA)

Some 6,000 miles away from their homes in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza, 26 young Israelis and Palestinians have come to Boston this week, ready to spend their summer curating startup ventures and innovating together.

Following in the footsteps of an inaugural class in 2016, they are the second cohort of budding entrepreneurs taking part in Our Generation Speaks (OGS), a fellowship program and incubator for emerging Israeli and Palestinian leaders, housed at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management in nearby Waltham. Rather than rely on political processes to bridge gaps between the two populations, OGS aims to identify those who have the capacity to foster change through collaborative work.

"The idea was: Let's focus on those who have the potential for exponential impact, those that can become leaders of their communities, those that can inspire others," OGS founder and executive director Ohad Elhelo, told *The Jerusalem Post* by phone last week.

Like so many Jewish Israelis, Elhelo, 27, had little contact with Arab-Israelis and Palestinians during his childhood in the southern seaside city of Ashdod.

"I only realized how important it is to have Arab friends when I joined the military," he said.

While the majority of his service occurred near the northern border on the Golan Heights, Elhelo stressed that the little he experienced of the West Bank made him understand that the military environment was one of the only frameworks under which Israelis and Palestinians typically interact.

“This is something I find to be very counterproductive, because to build a sustainable future for Israelis and Palestinians, you need to have relationships,” he said. “In order to have relationships, you need to have trust. In order to have trust, you need to get to know each other.”

When he was finishing up his service, Elhelo heard about Brandeis University’s Slifka Israeli Coexistence Scholarship, which brings two Israelis – one Jewish and one Arab – to complete a fully funded bachelor’s degree each year. He applied and was accepted, arriving on campus about four years ago. Since then, he has not only completed both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in economics, but also spearheaded the unprecedented OGS program.

“Instead of inspiring the community, I was inspired myself,” Elhelo said.

Alongside his studies, Elhelo began lecturing about his military experience, particularly about his insights gained during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge. Lacking confidence in the political leadership on both sides to solve the conflict, he said he felt that the best chance for peace was through person-to-person interactions. The question remained, however, how to get Israelis and Palestinians to work together.

Slowly but surely, Elhelo started building a program that would focus on young adults, aged 21-31, who have the capacity to become community leaders as they cultivate start-ups together.

“These people are old enough to have demonstrated high evidence of leadership,” he said. “But at the same time, they are still at the age where they are open to ideas, where they say let’s approach traditional problems in an innovative way. This is an age group that is usually neglected.”

Despite the fact that he had never been part of a start-up venture himself, Elhelo was able to raise the initial funds necessary to finance the program. After bringing 22 people to Brandeis last summer in the program’s inaugural class, he raised an additional \$3 million from investors for the next three

years.

“Brandeis is proud of Ohad and Our Generation Speaks,” said Brandeis University president Ronald Liebowitz. “We are hopeful that this innovative program, based here at Brandeis, will yield benefits to the Middle East region. As an institution established by the American Jewish community the same year as the State of Israel was founded, Brandeis plays a special and unique role in higher education. By bringing together talented young entrepreneurs from Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, we are very pleased to be putting our strength to work for the region.”

This year, Elhelo and his team members have recruited 26 participants, including 12 Jewish Israelis, three non-Jewish Israelis, nine West Bank Palestinians and two Gazan Palestinians – with equal male and female representation. While program eligibility requirements are fairly flexible, OGS participants must have an undergraduate degree, a history of leadership and proven experience working in a team.

Shortly after arriving in Boston, the participants begin pitching start-up ideas that could positively impact their respective communities – aiming to convince their peers to get on board with their proposals and join their teams, Elhelo said. They also have the opportunity to sway potential investors at the international accelerator MassChallenge, an OGS partner.

By the end of the summer, several teams are chosen to receive seed funding, Elhelo said. All of the fellows have the opportunity to acquire a small piece of equity in the funded ventures at the conclusion of the program.

During their stay at Brandeis, the participants also enroll in an academic program tailored for them at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, where they learn from Brandeis faculty members how to build a sound business plan, Elhelo explained.

In 2016, three start-ups received seed funding: Genesis, which focuses on genetic disease screenings in the Beduin community; MVPeer, which

connects Israeli and American start-ups to skilled Palestinian developers; and Qual.IT, which aims to satisfy global demand for outsourced IT services by employing skilled Palestinian IT graduates.

Two other companies founded by OGS alumni, MiiBox and My Pink Electronics, also eventually received funding in 2017. The former offers Arab-Israeli women a tailor-made cosmetics shopping experience, while the latter equips Palestinian women from east Jerusalem with technological skills.

Abeer al-Natsheh, the founder and managing director of My Pink Electronics, said that she first found out about OGS through the OneVoice Movement, a global initiative supporting Israeli and Palestinian grassroots activists, where she has been volunteering for the past decade.

For Natsheh, OGS offered an attractive “new idea of not only talking to your community, but talking to the Israeli community, too – knowing them on the basis of economics, doing projects with them.” Prior to participating in the program last summer, she said she knew very little about the Israeli community, despite living in such close proximity to Israelis in east Jerusalem.

“I was aiming to get to know people more than anything else, have a chance to live with a community,” she told the Post.

Her time at Brandeis helped open her eyes not only to the Israeli community, but also to the Palestinian community in Gaza and the obstacles the population there faces, Natsheh explained. As the program brings more and more people together each year, a growing team of OGS alumni can remain in touch with one another and continue to speak freely, she added.

“It brings people together on a different level – an economic level,” Natsheh said. “We’ll have leaders with financial ability that can create a change.”

Participation in OGS had a similarly strong impact upon Noam Mordechay, a Galilee region native who now serves as co-chairman of the OGS Alumni Organization. Mordechay, who has worked in business development in both

Israel and abroad, found that the program helped him to enter the world of entrepreneurship, as well as to make personal connections he never thought possible.

“For me, it was the first time I got to engage with Palestinians whatsoever,” he said. “It was a groundbreaking experience on that end.”

By participating in OGS side-by-side, Israelis and Palestinians are able to develop a passion for the same ideas and build their ventures together, alongside a prestigious academic curriculum and mentorship opportunities from high-profile business figures, according to Mordechay.

For Mordecahy, the OGS program not only enables the fellows to “build bridges” in the short-term by launching companies together, but also provides them with the longterm benefits of an alumni community. The program, he explained, has the capacity to generate wiser leaders who can make tough decisions with an added life perspective.

“It was the first time that I felt there was potential to work together and get to know one and other,” Mordechay said.

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