



# NEWS FROM **Seraj Library Project**

*Empowering communities in Palestine, one library at a time*

December 2023

Dear Seraj Supporter,

As I write, a war is raging in Gaza and Palestinians on the West Bank are being harassed, kidnapped, assaulted and worse at an alarming rate. I simply cannot comprehend the dehumanization that has been put upon the beautiful people of my adopted homeland.

Our lives and plans have been interrupted in a most radical way. In the “little town” that many around the world will celebrate this month, the Christians of Bethlehem have canceled Christmas. Christians in the Holy Land will not be putting up holiday decorations or engaging in festive events. Instead, we are calling on Christians around the world to stand in solidarity with the hundreds of thousands killed and displaced in Gaza.

Even though our regularly scheduled activities have been interrupted, we have turned inwards at Seraj and are caring for our communities in the best way we can—through storytelling, yoga, meditation sessions, music and art therapy, and of course access to our beautiful and safe spaces. We hope and pray for an immediate ceasefire and dream of the day when we can celebrate joyfully again.

With love from Palestine,  
Laurie Salameh



## 2023 Annual Report

As you [read a report about this past year](#), be proud of all we have accomplished together. Know that your support has and will again bring joy to the most deserving people and communities.





## Before the War

Until the war began, 2023 was a great year for Seraj:

- In a Zoom call with the board of directors in the U.S., the chair of the board in Palestine reported that Seraj had expanded its reach and is now seen as a **“flagship operation” within Palestine**. While travel within Palestine is not easy, Seraj was sending out storytellers beyond its libraries and also providing transportation to bring more people to their activities.
- The staff has grown to 8, and **a 13th library has opened in Al-Jib**.
- In Kufor 'Aqab, someone—it isn't clear who—planted roses in the “Ancestors Garden” next to the library and storytelling center.
- **A boy from the Qalandia refugee camp** won the 2023 Seraj Storytelling Marathon by telling his story to over 300 people who were gathered in a stadium. (The goal of the marathon is to learn a story and perform it for as many people as possible.) Check out [this video](#) to share in the excitement.
- In September, Seraj spent its annual budget for new books at the 13th Palestine International Book Fair in Ramallah.



- **Fida'a Ataya, Kavalya Atma Kaur, and Hanna Salmon** represented Seraj at a festival in Philadelphia, where they were invited to lecture on the difference between men's and women's storytelling traditions.



Let the Storytelling Marathon roll.

## Meet Hanna Salmon

Researcher, Musician, and PhD Student in Ethnomusicology  
University of Texas

I became involved with the Seraj Libraries team when I went to Palestine to complete my dissertation research on how Palestinian storytellers use music and how storytelling impacts Palestinian communities.

During my time at the Seraj center in Kufor 'Aqab, I played my *oud* and performed alongside Seraj storytellers Fida'a Ataya and Kavalya Atma Kaur at other libraries, festivals, and schools. Beautiful relationships bloomed from these events, as stories—both from personal memories and folkloric repertoires—were told; laughter and tears bubbled; and our bonds to the land, heritage, and community were strengthened. We



**Hakawatiyyeh | Storytelling and Music**  
الحكاوية | قصص وموسيقى

Join our hakawatiyyeh oral storytellers

experienced joy and practiced *sumoud* (steadfastness) in the face of profound obstacles to daily life in that region.

My thanks to the Friends of Seraj, whose support makes possible the essential art of storytelling in Palestine, and to Fida'a, Kavalia, Laurie, and the women of the Storytelling Academy for supporting my work and teaching me so much during my time in Palestine.

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## Many Thanks to Our Sponsors

As you know, the *Taste of Seraj Palestine* event, originally scheduled in Chicago in November, was postponed until a happier time. Nevertheless all of the supporters, who had already come forward, generously elected to donate their sponsorships. We are very grateful.

### Olive Tree (\$1,500)

Galen & Birch Burghardt  
Hoogendoorn & Talbot LLP  
Senator John Millner  
Mary E. Morton  
Atty. Rima Najjar Kapitan  
Ed & Marilyn Thompson

### Date Palm (\$1,000)

Joyce & John Cassel  
Pauline Coffman  
Dr. Margaret O. Griffiths  
Mary & Patrick Leone  
Anita & Richard Thies

### Fig Tree (\$500)

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Anne Cordes  
Myra Janus  
Verniel Lundquist  
Joe Weaver

### Pomegranate (\$250)

Alvin Beatty  
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Richard & Ann Jorgensen  
Heidi Levin  
Dr. Tina Mattera & Frank Baumann  
Anne McIntosh  
Joan Powers  
Dr. Bruce & Mary Rigdon  
Euclid Avenue United Methodist Church  
Dale & Alice Valaskovic

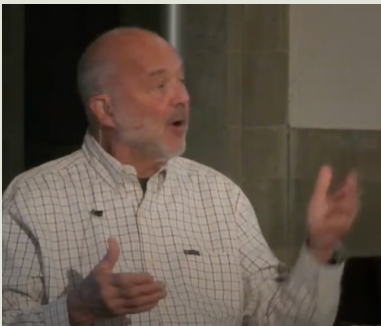
### Za'atar (\$100)

Peter Finger  
Colleen Harbison  
Nasser Nabhan  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church  
Aaron Wissmann

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## ... and special thanks to John Cassel

One of the things that encourages giving to Seraj is the fact that, year after year, the administrative cost of our operations here in the U.S. is close to zero. Almost 100% of donations to Seraj go directly to Palestine for books and programs, library maintenance, and staff costs.



For this the primary credit goes to Seraj/U.S. Treasurer and board member John Cassel. As a volunteer since 2014, John plays a critical role in every aspect of U.S. support for Seraj, including coordination with other leaders, database management, finances (banking, reporting, gift acknowledgement), newsletters, and benefit events. With another unpaid staff member, Luca Salameh, John launched and continues to maintain the Seraj website.

A tireless promoter, John recently gave [a wonderful presentation about Seraj at St. Bart's Episcopal Church in Manhattan](#).

Thank you, John, for so amplifying the voices of all those who support the mission of the Seraj Library Project and for making our donations go so much further.

To donate to the important work of SERAJ

[CLICK HERE](#)



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