

# THE SERAJ LIBRARY PROJECT

Civic education continues to be the best route to democracy, human rights and peace.



## 2023 Annual Report to Donors

*Shining Light in Deep Darkness*

Seraj is deeply grateful for the opportunity to report on remarkable activities and recent developments. While the war has redirected many of our programs and progress, we continue to look forward. We invite you to read, to weep, and to stay committed to our mission.

[www.serajlibraries.org](http://www.serajlibraries.org)



# Greetings from **Laurie Salameh**, Executive Director, Seraj/Palestine

December 2023

Dear Friends,

I sit here at my laptop with a heavy heart. As I write, the war on Gaza is raging. Violence, kidnapping, and fear have drastically increased in the West Bank. Palestinians are attacked in the U.S. for wearing their traditional scarves. It seems there is no safe place to be a Palestinian in this world. Why?

I've lived here nearly two decades and cannot comprehend the dehumanization that has been put upon the people of my adopted homeland, people who yearn to be free of oppression, to live their lives in peace, to send their kids to good schools, to travel freely within their own country and abroad, to marry whom they wish and make a simple and decent life for themselves and their families.

This current war began on October 7 but it followed decades upon decades of oppression and dehumanization. When there is darkness all around, our eyes become adjusted to that and it's difficult for us to see the light.

So I sit here, in the courtyard of Seraj's library and cultural center in the Old City of Birzeit, surrounded by homes that have housed generations upon generations of families,

constructed of stone that has existed longer than I can comprehend. For 200 years, before Seraj turned it into a thriving library, this area was called The Courtyard of Darkness, because its shape made it difficult for light to reach inside the houses. But I allow myself to smile now, knowing that *seraj* means “the light of the lantern” in Arabic. I watch students laugh and study, girls and boys play guitar and sing together, mothers read to their children, and senior citizens gather to tell old stories. The Seraj Library Project shines light in the darkness.

We are all grieving right now. But how can you grieve an open wound? I’m not sure, but I do know that our work is as important now as it has ever been. We have created safe and beautiful spaces and activities for community members to find their voices, to push against despair, to imagine, dream and play. As you read our report from last year, be proud of all we have accomplished together. Know that your support has and continues to bring joy to the most deserving people and communities.



May our people know peace, and if we cannot find the light in the darkness, may we allow ourselves to be that light.

In love and gratitude,

Laurie

## Greetings from Galen Burghardt, Board Chair, Seraj/US



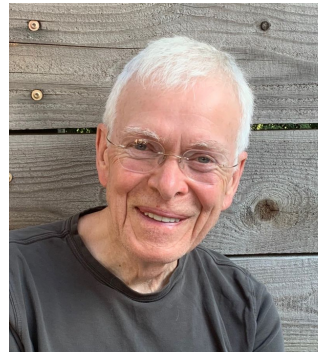
Until this horrific war began in October, Seraj/Palestine was doing amazing work. The two new centers were drawing people from their communities in record numbers. A 13th library was opened and Seraj was becoming a destination for people from the U.S. and Europe. It was all like a dream coming true.

Now we don't know what the world will look like when the war comes to an end, but Seraj/Palestine has accomplished the most wonderful things imaginable in a challenging environment. We are fully confident that, when they can get back on their feet, they will continue working the miracles for which they have become known throughout Palestine and the world. Anything you give now will be held in trust by Seraj/US allowing for a rapid recovery.

I hope, then, that you will join me and others in supporting the Seraj Library Project.

Galen

Galen Burghardt lives in Evanston, IL and is active at St. Luke's Episcopal Church



# About the 13 Seraj Libraries

*Be welcome and safe, learn, heal*

## Ramadan Nights Festival



Seraj hosted its 8th annual **Ramadan Nights Festival**, bringing together storytellers, musicians and artists who visited each of our libraries and partner communities to celebrate the holy month of Ramadan with stories and songs, as has been tradition in Palestine for more than a thousand years.

The festival is a chance for families to break the fast together, connect to generations before and to be together without TVs, phones and video games, to laugh, sing and enjoy.



# Storytelling Academy & Curriculum

The **Seraj Storytelling Academy** is a three-year program in which participants attend weekly classes to learn the art of storytelling and how to collect, curate and perform individual and personal stories. They learn how to find and develop their unique voices. Our students are women from different professions and backgrounds, including teachers, a school principal, a local government official, a lawyer, an artist and many others.



Each year the Academy forms a new cohort of women who grow close to and support one another, both professionally and personally. Even more exciting is watching how they discover the strength and power of their own voices.

The foundation of the Academy is a 300-page **Storytelling Curriculum** on the art of Palestinian storytelling, written and published by Seraj in Arabic. Almost nothing was previously written on this subject. In the near future, Seraj aims to translate the curriculum into English.



# International Storytelling Festival

Seraj held the first **International Storytelling Festival** in Palestine, hosted by the Storytelling Center in Birzeit. The festival featured performances from professional storytellers from Palestine, Italy, England, Ghana and the U.S.



Each performance was delivered in both Arabic and English by a Palestinian and an international storyteller. This festival highlights the importance of fairy tales, folk tales, and wonder tales in honor of our ancestors and the oral traditions kept by women around the world for thousands of years.



# Activities for Seniors

Old is Gold



# Collaborative Libraries Initiative

including the new library in Al-Jib





# Seraj Finances

## A Strong Response to a Deep and Continuing Need

### Fiscal Year 2023: Strong Support

Regular donations and the October 2022 benefit event generated a record response from 230 individuals and organizations, including 71 first-time donors: \$152,673. Almost all of these contributions go directly to Seraj/Palestine to support libraries and programs. A remarkable \$375,813 was available to Seraj/Palestine in 2023 because spending was low during the pandemic years. Expenditures included the one-time cost of rehabilitating and furnishing the new cultural centers in Kufor Aqab and Birzeit, which totalled \$213,120.

### Fiscal Year 2024: Continuing Need

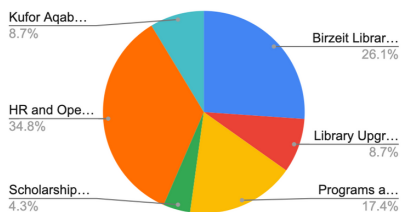
Before the war began, we planned to send \$170,000 to Palestine from July 2023 through June 2024. The cost of boosting Seraj's social media presence in Palestine was paying off. Enthusiastic attendance at the two new cultural centers called for increased hours, staffing, and programming. We had even begun to explore the idea of opening a library in Gaza. As we write, many programs and all development efforts have paused.

### Ongoing Support

But as we learned when the pandemic lifted, your ongoing gifts will enable Seraj to reopen, revitalize, and redouble its commitment. As things unfold, we will continue to meet the pressing needs of families and communities for civic education .

Activity	FY 2023
Birzeit Library Cultural Center	\$60,000
Library Upgrades	\$20,000
Programs and Activities	\$40,000
Scholarship Program	\$10,000
HR and Operations	\$80,000
Kufor Aqab Storytelling Center	\$20,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$230,000</b>

FY 2023



# Seraj Library Project Donors

## 2023 Fiscal Year

*Our thanks to those who have partnered  
with Seraj to create libraries and empower  
Palestinian communities*



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**If we have missed you, or you  
 see another mistake, please  
 alert us. Many thanks!**

Our **fiscal year runs** from July 1  
 through June 30.



# Donors are Key to Our Mission

*We need you, this year  
and every year*



## **MAKE A GIFT of any amount**

Your gift will buy books, computers and library equipment and provide scholarships for college students who volunteer in Seraj libraries. A recurring monthly or quarterly contribution helps us plan.

## **INTRODUCE a friend or a group to Seraj**

Tell them why the mission of Seraj is important to you and to so many Palestinians. Forward a recent Seraj newsletter and show them *serajlibraries.org*

## **VOLUNTEER to support this important work**

Seraj/US is an all-volunteer organization. We welcome your help with our joy-filled efforts. Visit the Support Page on our website and register your interest.

## **CONSIDER planned giving**

While we wish you long, happy, and fruitful lives, please remember the good that will be done with the treasure you leave to The St. Jerome Fund.

## **KEEP LEARNING**

Let us know if you're interested in widening your knowledge of Palestine and Israel. We're glad to suggest a wide range of sources, both historical and contemporary and opportunities to visit this beautiful and troubled land, with histories and narratives that we all need to understand better.

**[www.serajlibraries.org](http://www.serajlibraries.org)**