

TRAVELS TO THE MIDDLE EAST

(full article)

By Javier Caballero

In December 2008, I was first invited to perform concerts for a music school in the West Bank called *Al Kamandjati* (Arabic for ‘the violinist’). I was invited by Peter Sulski, a Boston area violist, and Ramzi Aburedwan, the founder of *Al Kamandjati*. I met both Peter and Ramzi many years ago at the Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music in New Hampshire. You may have heard about Apple Hill from the PBS documentary “Playing for Peace” which focused on their annual tours to the Middle East and their summer festival that brings Israeli and Palestinian students together to play chamber music in the mountains of New Hampshire.

That December, I traveled for the first time with Peter to Ramallah where we joined a group of other international musicians from the UK, France, Italy, and Germany for two weeks of concerts, lessons, and workshops—I was even drafted for one of the concerts to perform on double bass for my first time ever! I also had the opportunity to teach a few cello lessons, which proved a little challenging considering my Arabic was virtually non-existent. Fortunately, music is indeed an international language! I distinctly remember packing for that first trip and making sure not to include any t-shirts with writing in English that would give away my identity as an American since I wasn’t really expecting people on the streets of Ramallah to be welcoming of Americans. I could not have been more wrong and the reception we received could not have been more welcoming or hospitable. I would later find out there is truth behind the phrase ‘Arab hospitality’, very much like the term ‘Southern hospitality’ we have here in the US. The students, their families and even strangers on the street all shared a fascination and friendliness towards us foreigners. The West Bank I experienced in person was not the same West Bank I had always read about in the news.

During my trip, I also visited several of my Israeli musician friends from Apple Hill living in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It was a rather interesting experience sharing my adventures in the West Bank with my friends in Israel because they had so many questions as to what life is like “over there”—meaning next door in the West Bank. In this age of globalization, I found it quite the conundrum that I would come from half a globe away and be the one to provide insight for my friends into what life is like just a few miles away—almost as an ambassador of cultural exchange. At the same time, I was able to understand firsthand that this unique situation is a result of a long history steeped in conflict and strife.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to return to *Al Kamandjati* on three other occasions: June 2009, December 2009, and most recently this past June 2010. On each trip I have been fortunate enough to count more and more Israelis and Palestinians as my friends. After my experiences on both sides of the conflict, I firmly believe that if more people would see what I have seen either side, this conflict would not be where it is today. If you ever get the opportunity to travel to the Middle East, go see for yourself. Meanwhile, I eagerly await my next opportunity to go back “over there” and continue my work as a musical ‘ambassador’!

Javier Caballero is the Program Coordinator at Project STEP. He received Bachelors degrees in Cello Performance and Music Education from the University of South Florida as a student of Scott Kluksdahl and a Masters degree in Cello Performance from the Boston Conservatory as a student of Rhonda Rider. He is also a freelance cellist and teaches strings for the Brookline Public Schools, as well as privately.