

## **Lebanon School Rises Above, Transforms Children's Lives**

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Beirut, Lebanon

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Abdo Khanashat was standing near the window of his first floor office when the bomb hit. The blast ripped a hole in the Sin el-Fil Church of the Nazarene sanctuary, which is attached to the Nazarene Evangelical School where Khanashat serves as director. During the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the threat of such bombings was very real, and he was forced to close the school several times. He even spent nine days living in a bomb shelter in the basement when it was too dangerous for him to navigate the bullet-riddled streets to go home to his family.

In spite of the 15 tumultuous years during which neighbors once looted the building, taking tables, chairs, and other equipment, Khanashat kept things going almost single-handedly.

Under Khanashat's direction, the Nazarene Evangelical School, founded in the 1960s is now a thriving educational center with more than 200 children enrolled, at least 50 of whom are from Syrian refugee families.

### **From Orphanage to Director**

Khanashat grew up in a Lutheran orphanage in Lebanon. His father died when he was 2 years old, and his mother was unable to care for him. From his early childhood, he was aware of God's presence in his life.

"He accompanied me since I was 9 years old," Khanashat said. "At that time I realized I have another Father who cares for me more than a human being father. I didn't feel scared because I felt that really my Lord was with me and helping me in everything."

As he grew up, he sensed God calling him into ministry. The leaders at his orphanage suggested that he be a pastor. Missionaries offered to send him to Switzerland to study in a seminary. However, his mother did not want him to go so far away. So he obeyed and stayed in Lebanon.

Later he received a scholarship to study engineering in Germany. Again his mother begged him not to go and again Khanashat obeyed. He believes it was God's will for him to stay in Lebanon.

When he graduated from school, he struck out on his own, taking his first job at a German school in Beirut as a teacher, where he worked for four years. It wasn't a good atmosphere at the school, however. The leaders belonged to another religion and were always trying to convert him. One day in 1967, Khanashat's tailor invited him to attend the Church of the Nazarene in Ashrafiyeh. On his first Sunday, Khanashat realized he'd found something special.

"I said, 'This is what I'm looking for.'"

He became familiar with the Nazarene Evangelical School and applied to work there, being

named principal. At the time, there were 25 children and three teachers in a six-room school. He was shocked when he discovered the school did not have a license, so he worked hard to obtain a deed for the property and to register the school with the government, eventually receiving a license in 1973. Then, he put a big sign outside advertising the school.

By 1975, the school's attendance multiplied to 350 students. The school was well-known and well-loved.

## **War**

That year, the Lebanese Civil War broke out. The school sat right on the line that divided the Christian neighborhood from the Muslim neighborhood, and it became too dangerous for the teachers or students to travel to the school. It was shut down from 1975 to 1979. During that time people from both neighborhoods broke into the school and stole everything. The walls on the east side of the school were destroyed so that fighters could carry their wounded through the school property to safety within their neighborhoods.

The bomb that hit the school's rooftop destroyed all the records for the school and the church.

In the early war years, the Nazarenes were unable to communicate with the greater church outside the country.

"The war was very terrible," Khanashat said. "We had no gasoline and sometimes no bread. How did God support us, I don't know. We couldn't contact anybody. No telephones, no cell phones, no means of connection, no post. I felt alone."

As time went by, conditions around the school improved. Khanashat decided to reopen the school on days without bombing. The teachers went on a day-to-day contract, meaning they were paid for each day they taught. Khanashat braved the dangerous streets and crossed blockades to deliver the teachers' salaries to their respective homes so they would have money to buy food.

The school also provided a shelter below the school for up to 150 neighbors during bombings.

## **Turnaround**

In 1985, the situation again improved and school resumed regularly. Marlene Mshantaf was appointed principal.

Khanashat was finally able to get a message through to the Church of the Nazarene's Eurasia Region director, Franklin Cook, and the education coordinator, John Haines. They were eager to hear news from the Nazarenes in Lebanon. It was still too dangerous to go to the airport, so Khanashat took a boat to Cyprus and flew to the regional office in Büsingen, Switzerland, where he met them to discuss the situation. They were ready to help. They organized several shipping containers with food, clothes, and other needed items.

In 1986, Khanashat decided to expand the school, which at that time served grades 1 to 6. He added grades 7 to 9. With donated funds, he built another floor on the school, rebuilt the church — fixing the bombed hole in the ceiling — and renovated the bathrooms. In 1990, they opened a

library, a laboratory, and a room for computer training.

Recently, the school added a rooftop playground for young children. After years of enduring daily outages from public electricity and buying electricity from a private generator for US\$900 per month to keep lights on and computers running, a donor gave US\$7,000 through Nazarene Compassionate Ministries so the school could purchase its own generator.

Today the school has 210 students ages 3 to 15. The children come from numerous religious backgrounds, but the parents understand that they will learn Christian principles at school. Every day the children attend chapel, where they hear Bible stories and the gospel, and once a week they attend Bible classes.

The school is now a safe place for the flood of Syrian children who are fleeing from a civil war in their own country to find safety and continue their education in Beirut — a city that understands civil war. This year the school is serving 50 Syrian children. Twenty-five of the children are supported through a US\$50,000 grant from Nazarene Compassionate Ministries.

[Editor's Note: Please pray for the children and staff at the Nazarene Evangelical School in Beirut, Lebanon.]

(This article appeared originally in the February 8, 2014 edition of NCN News. It is reprinted here by permission. Go to [www.ncnnews.com](http://www.ncnnews.com) for pictures and a video about the school.)