Weaving Baskets Between Two Worlds

Sindyanna of Galilee, in cooperation with Hanitzotz Publishing House (HPH) and the Workers Advice Center (WAC), has initiated a course in basketry in Nazareth. Ten women took part, most of them housewives.

Hanan Manadreh

In the days of our forefathers, or better, foremothers, women made baskets. These were essential to a human life, but more than that, they were a perennial font of creative expression. As with many traditional crafts, however, basketry has drifted toward extinction.

Sindyanna's idea is to revive the commercial production of basketry as a niche for jobless Arab women. During the last few years, in the hands of Israelis who are "nuts about it," basketry has begun to strike new roots here. The new "basketeers" prefer to use the bases of palm fronds to reproduce traditional Arab basketry, which was based on olive and mastic branches. The fronds are especially strong and durable. They provide a unique, attractive, authentic look.

Sindyanna of Galilee, along with HPH and WAC, conducted a basketry course from May until July. There were eleven sessions of six hours each. Ten women took part, and all successfully finished. Much to the surprise of the organizers, they persisted through all the meetings. Their seriousness expressed a strongly-felt need to broaden their horizons and to earn a living. They donated their finished products to Sindyanna, which will sell them in a bazaar to cover, in part, the costs of the course.

Hadas Lahav, Director of Sindyanna, outlined the course's aims: "The idea is to prepare a team of women who will be able to make baskets that can meet the demands of the market. Our purpose is twofold: to preserve a traditional craft and to offer women a source of livelihood that is flexible and real."

Lahav added that Sindyanna intends to market the baskets along with its olive oil, which it already exports throughout the world. "Our outlets work on a fair-trade basis, and they identify strongly with the Palestinian issue, especially with Palestinian women in Israel and the Occupied Territories."

The instructor, Ronit Penn from Tivon, is a graduate of Oranim College's

Ronit Penn (left) with a basketry student

Art Faculty. A member of the British Basketmakers Association, she has taught the craft for seven years. She told *Challenge*: "Ever since I was a child I've felt the need to understand traditional Arab society and learn about the lives of its women. My knowledge of basketry has opened a way. The reason for learning this craft isn't just commercial. It's also for the sake of the 'meeting' that occurs while you're working together. Basketry builds constructive feelings in a group. It develops the maker in both the social and the individual sense.

"Someone who buys handmade things is conscious of their aesthetic value and has the feeling of the living hands at work. Basketry," Penn continues, "can be especially important for a society in transition, such as Arab society in Israel. The switch from a traditional to a modern society often lacks the artistic link. From village life, steeped in religion, to a secular, intellectual life, the change is drastic and sometimes lethal. What is lacking here is a culture of transition, one that can develop something new from *within* the tradition."

On the concept that guided the course for women, Penn explains: "Basketry is learned in stages. First one masters basic techniques using

easy materials, like lake reeds. Then one moves to sturdier materials, like branches, learning various styles and techniques.

"Basketry has one other major advantage," Penn adds. "You can also do it at home, which fits the life style of women in Arab society. True, this work doesn't cause a revolution. It doesn't get the woman out of the house, necessarily. But it can provide her with a measure of financial stability and in this way gradually help bring about the change women want."

Samya Salah (23), a mother of three from Nazareth, has completed the course and hopes to continue in her new field: "I've taken several handicrafts courses in the past," she says, "but there was something different in this one. I mean the positive atmosphere that resulted from working in a group of excellent women and with the sensitive guidance of Ronit. The process of learning basketry linked me to an ancient traditional knowledge, and at the same time it gave me a profession. I've found new abilities that I didn't know I had. This strengthens my self-confidence and increases my appreciation for the craft. Even if I won't be able to make a living from it, I'm going to encourage my friends and neighbors, and my children too, to learn it, if only to preserve the positive aspects of our tradition."

Suhad Manadreh (31), a mother of four from Nazareth, also finished the course and does not stop praising it: "I hope I'll be able to work and develop in this traditional field. I had a great time in the course, and I learned new things, which can give my life new content. The baskets we made are in my opinion artistic creations in the full sense of the word. At every meeting I felt that I am capable of producing, between my hands, things of beauty and value." ■

For more about Sindyanna of Galilee and the basketry project, see www.sindyanna.com or contact us at <sindyan@ netvision.net.il>.