



Changing attitudes to the disabled: James Grew, President, OMV finds how the Lebanese Association's summer camp inspires British Order of Malta Volunteers (OMV)

Pioneers of change

THE LEBANESE ASSOCIATION OF THE ORDER runs camps for mentally and physically disabled guests from care homes in the mountains around Beirut, and last summer an OMV group took part for the first time. The project was initiated some years ago by the Lebanese and German Associations.

The Lebanese team is truly admirable. They dedicate their time to helping others. They are pioneers in changing attitudes towards the disabled in their country, due entirely to their experiences and love of their friends, the guests. Now others are getting involved, including teams from France and Belgium.

The overriding power of love

I remember contemplating, in one of the few moments of peace and quiet, the strange sounding 'mufradat' (vocabulary) which our Lebanese friends had kindly supplied. The phrases: "need loo?", "want food?", "tea or coffee?", "how are you?" and "stop!" saved many a tricky situation and aided our guests to be fed and made comfortable. But that was very limited communication, and I came to value the overriding power of love which can cross even the toughest language barrier and establish a real relationship of trust and affection. I was envious of the Lebanese helpers' ability to chat with our mentally and physically disabled guests. It was shocking to discover that Georges (my charge, who enjoyed moving all the chairs from the chapel to outside, pacing up and down, spontaneously laughing, scribbling on paper and following the Abouna (priest)

OMV go on pilgrimage with guests – Sarah Hewett and guest Emma Harles; James Grew and a guest

everywhere) had a wife, children somewhere, and had served his country in war only 20 years ago. Nothing could make me want to learn a new way of communication more than this man, who had previously lived a full life but is now unable to survive on his own.

Memories of Chabrouh sustain the guests the whole, monotonous year

At the Order of Malta camp at Chabrouh we learned how to care for our guests, for their comforts and what they enjoy. Most special for me was when I received even their smallest gesture of gratitude. I realised that the help and love we could give was totally alien to them. When we visited Deir el Salib, where the camp's guests live, we all experienced a realisation of the benefit of our work – and only then could appreciate the true value of it. Memories of the camp sustain the guests for the coming monotonous year; something to look forward to, to cling to. For me, the memories help me appreciate how much my time can benefit others.

We learned, too

Having never worked with disabled people, I found it challenging to communicate and interact with my first guest. But through working with this stubborn yet infinitely charming man I learned to appreciate what we can all offer to our fellow men and women: time, patience, love.

The first full OMV Camp to Lebanon succeeded because of the enthusiasm and dedication of Ellie Coward and her team. The camp would also not have been possible without the generous hospitality and efficiency of the Lebanese Association.

Beguiling Beirut

Throughout our 14 days in Lebanon, we hosted over 40 guests (20 male, 20 female). In between times we managed visits to explore the intricate architecture of Beit a Dine, and absorbing, abundant, beguiling Beirut, a mélange of multi-cultural and ever changing attitudes, epitomised perhaps by the daily change in direction of the motorway.

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We are off again this summer for another two-week camp and I hope there will be many more to come.

