

## **From Hala Tomeh (Ibrahim) ('72)**

September 1, 1977, I set foot in Amman, Jordan for the very first time. I came to start my first job with the Ministry of Social Development to help them start their first two centers for the mentally challenged. I came as a single woman to a society where young adults lived with their parents until they married. The only thing that saved my honor at the time was the fact that there were no people specialized in Special Education at the time. An adventure started.

Forty-two years later, I'm still here and still working, supposedly on a part-time basis. I've had many firsts during my career: At the time I came, I also helped higher education programs start diplomas and degrees in training of special education teachers, did in-service training for staff of centers for the mentally challenged, and helped a group of parents establish a society for the families of the mentally challenged. On the side, I did developmental assessments for children who were referred to me because at the time, we did not have any one specialized to do so. I also worked as a consultant for UNESCO for the Arab Region.

After ten years, the demands of the field made me shift my focus to learning difficulties in schools. I was receiving more and more requests to do academic assessments to guide parents and schools how to work with students who were facing these issues. Only one private school had started a resource class in all of Jordan. I assisted several schools start learning support programs, did tons of workshops on Inclusion, class and behavior management, and started the practice of regular in-service training for staff of private schools. The public sector was not ready for inclusion so my focus was in private schools. However, I was able to work in the public sector through UNESCO's dissemination of a teacher training pack on Inclusion which took me to many parts of the Arab World for training at governmental, community, and school levels. I helped establish the first educational and counseling center in Jordan through a royal decree because at the time, neither the ministries of education, health, or social work would have us. The opening of this center helped in raising awareness for the need for the government to slowly take responsibility for these professions, which later started the ball rolling for certification of professionals in the field.

About 12 years later, another shift in my career came. Burn out from working in schools, teacher training, and running the center had hit. Throughout the years, I maintained seeing children and guiding parents and although there were many specialists in the field by then, I was known to be good with the difficult children. As I was considering my options, two sets of parents came for consultations about their toddlers who seemed to be on the autistic spectrum. They had agreed with an ABA (applied behavioral analysis) autism specialist in the US who agreed to work with them if they found someone who knew ABA. My Masters degree was from one of the main ABA programs at my time. So, a new track started for me whereby I was the program manager for the teams of these two kids and later for many others. Pack the old books and resources and get new ones for this job. The pride and joy of my career has been

here: I saw these two toddlers go from a 40hr training program per week with 1:1 support in schools to graduate from two of the top schools in Amman. They are now seniors in college!

After their high school graduation, I shifted to working part-time. I now have a few special students that I teach math. Through out the years, I found a passion in teaching math to special students. It also includes consulting and guiding parents, being a board member of the center, the ABA specialist started, participating with a committee on putting a ten-year plan for inclusion of special needs students for the Ministry of Education.

So, this is my final phase or so I say. I had promised my husband I'd retire when my two autistic high schoolers graduated, but that didn't happen. We'll see what the future brings.

As for my personal life, I did my BA in psychology at the American University of Beirut, Masters at the University of Oregon, Eugene. I got married to Raja'ee Ibrahim in 1980 and had two kids and now am a grandmother. In 2004, I met up with Marie-Nancy Pascal, my best friend at Lycée, in Antigua celebrating my son's high school graduation. Several years later, I met with Patsy Baudoin in Boston, where my daughter is working. I also became friends on Facebook with a few classmates from Lycée. I kept contact with M. Choquet by letters ever since I graduated in 1972 until he stopped answering them and later saw the announcement of his passing in the Lycée newsletters. And through the teachers' list, I found my favorite math teacher, M<sup>elle</sup> Popa and started correspondence with her.

Alive and well in Amman,

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