

YMCA 175

Oral Histories and Stories

Story teller Peter Nasir

Subject Personal Reflection

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**Peter Nasir, General Secretary, YMCA East Jerusalem.
YMCA175, ExCeL London**

Interview conducted by Ian MacKenzie

IM: I'd like to welcome you to our Epic Storytelling Place, my names Ian MacKenzie, I'm from YMCA Carrickfergus in Northern Ireland as part of the heritage exhibition event here at 175 and I'm really excited and have the pleasure to welcome Peter Nasir, from YMCA East Jerusalem, with us and we're going to ask a few questions about his involvement with YMCA and what he's got from the event and what he hopes to achieve through his work, so thank you very much Peter for coming.

PN: Thank you for having me.

IM: So, you work at YMCA East Jerusalem can you tell us how long you've been involved with the YMCA, maybe a little bit about your beginnings.

PN: Okay, sure! So I'm the General Secretary of the East Jerusalem YMCA, I have been in my position for six months. I have been involved with the YMCA, since I would say, since birth. I was born in the YMCA, my father was a General Secretary of the YMCA! So since I was a child, my childhood was in the Y, I'm part of the Y family since I was a young person.

IM: Okay, so for a long time and then six ,months ago you became General Secretary.

PN: Six months ago I became General Secretary.

IM: I mean, grew up through the YMCA, so tell us a little bit about what that looked like from a young age, what sort of things were you involved in, you experienced, was it a pleasurable one, was it challenging?

PN: It was challenging in terms of always living somewhere public, because we lived in the Y itself, however it was very rewarding and I've always had contact with people from all over the world from a young age, I travelled easily as a result of that, I would always be welcome wherever I go, then YMCA touched me in such a way and my heritage and maybe I never realised that while it was happening but the more know and the more I work, the more I reflect on the soft skills that I have, that I owe thanks to the Y.

IM: And so the YMCA East Jerusalem, does it have a long history in the country, has it been there for a long time and what sort of work has it done in its history?

PN: So our history is used to be the YMCA of Palestine, founded in 1878.

IM: Wow.

PN: As a result of the establishment of the state of Israel and the war that was fought in 1948, 85% of our people became refugees, the staff of YMCA of Palestine were unable to go to work anymore because the city of Jerusalem was divided. And YMCA was on the Israeli side, so five employees of that YMCA including the Chief Financial Officer who happens to be my grandfather started working with refugees they shuttled refugees from two towns that are by Tel Aviv by the airport, they shuttled them to the West Bank and in the hopes that they would return and then came October and they hadn't returned so they decided to move them to Jericho which because its below sea level it's a very

warm place, and it was an ex-refugee camp from Palestinians at the time. So the YMCA was in operation since October 1938 and the census of the biggest refugee camp was conducted by the YMCA, the Red Cross as the YMCA because they were staff and they were already there and working. They started in a tent, they built the school, they started a school in the camp, and then after three years they realised that still there was no solution for the refugee problem, they went for the **[[bottle of getting a fish, they are eating the fish?]]** and this is where they started with an education and training centre and we were starting this in 1952.

In 1953 we had the YMCA **[[inaudible place name]]** which is next to Bethlehem, in 1955 we had YMCA East Jerusalem which is currently my headquarters. It's my grandfathers office and my fathers office and lucky for me now I am - its my office today - so we have been working for the 72 years, 71 years in Palestine we have been responsive to our situation in the way George Williams responded to his. His needs were for youth that - who had - who were burning out by going to work, poverty etc. our needs happened to be more because of the political conflict, so we had a vocational training school in the 80s and the late 80s that was the uprising, and a response to a policy by the Israeli army of breaking the bones of youth who throw stones, the YMCA developed a programme, a rehabilitation programme, that started in 1989 officially, and for 30 years to today this programme is still established. We started as well a women's development programme who help women in a patriarchal society, so they can engage and work and contribute to their society as well. We have - in fact - because Palestinian women are very educated, all through school, and plenty are college educated as well, so its a waste that potentially they did not **[[inaudible]]**, this is a YMCA response to that. We have an emergency services unit programme that shut down where we did micro-finance loans that started in 1992. And we also have the Joint Advocacy Initiative where we advocate for Palestinian farmers and their rights to plant, we have them plant olive trees on average we plant 8,000 olive trees a year. This year however with our partnership with the **[Final Solution?]** initiative which is an insurance leading initiative our aim is to reach of 25 to 30,000 trees this year.

IM: Incredible, and it's incredible to hear through the history of the country and the people that YMCA has been on the ground working directly with the areas that need it most so, meeting the needs and facing head on the challenges. It seems like a very delicate and serious situation, and have the needs changed over time?

PN: The society has changed over time, the needs unfortunately haven't because the problem has never been addressed. Palestine is under military occupation for the last 50 plus years, refugees are still in debt for 70 plus years, so we keep responding and our programmes we can basically function in the same way, provided that there is no change to **[[inaudible]]** area around us. We do, in the 60s, we used to do a lot of sports and we... not only in the 60s but it carried on in the 70s, the 80s and under the 1967 order we came, all of us, under military occupation so you had different in-times(?). So we do have three sports and community centres, in Jerusalem, Ramallah and in Bethlehem Beit Sahur, which is next to Bethlehem.

But our four major programmes is really our backbone, this is what our identity is, we strive to be proud of the fact that we have all the **[[inaudible word follows]]** agenda, but we actually able to address and give good impact and we good programmes that really help you. We give hope to a lot of children, we give hope to a lot of people, we move people away from that, we channel that into positives. They have a right to be angry, they have the right to be understood for the situation that they

are in, but we help them to be smart about what they do, and to look forward to the future to the day comes that we will be liberated and free.

IM: And to give them skills and to help them manage themselves individually, for you having become General Secretary six months ago was that always on your journey or your path, did you have a sense or did you find yourself, now that I'm in this position, what am I bringing for the future?

PN: I've dreamt about it since I was a kid. Again, growing up in the building itself, going down to my father's office and seeing him, and my father passed away when I was young, so it's always been my dream and he's been the one person that I look up to 'til today and so it's nostalgic in a way that I get to sit behind his desk. I didn't - I thought I had a plan - until I got my feet firmly in the job and I got to one, I am one of the luckiest people because I have staff that are amazing. Two - I'm honoured to just be a part of that, that I can be the one to tell you the successes of our programmes. For the future we are looking to not only sustain what we do but hopefully grow our work to benefit a lot more people, youth, than we are doing now. Even though we have a substantial number now, and with direct and indirect beneficiaries the Y benefits around 60-65,000 people a year.

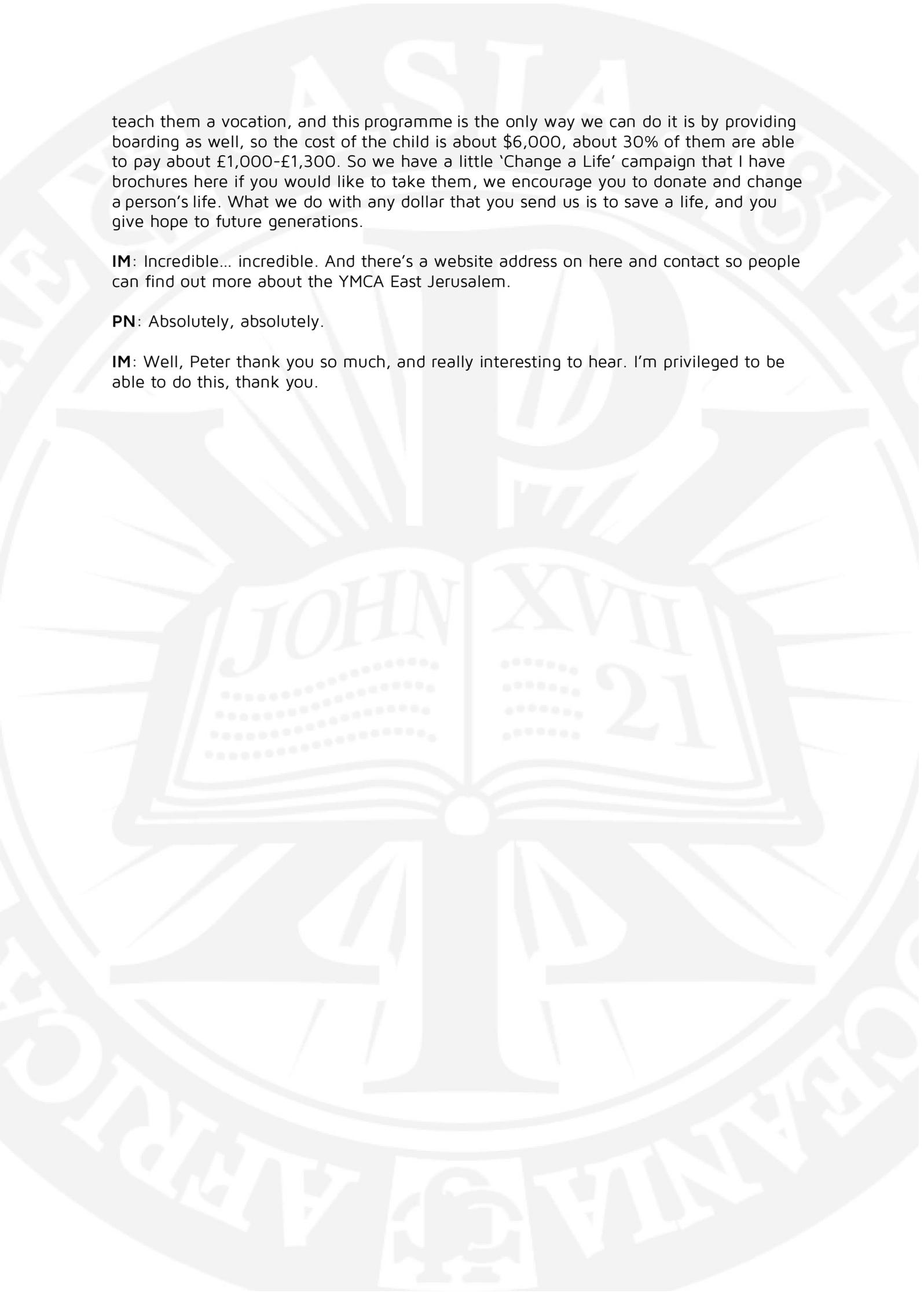
IM: Incredible, incredible. It's obviously very challenging, on your own managing a lot and keeping it forward, I suppose one final question - what has it meant for you and your team to be part of YMCA globally? And to actually be at this event, YMCA175, this week?

PN: You can never do anything alone, it's being part of a big family that's not only wounds you up but when you are at your lowest you are comforted, you have all these young people, you look at their smiles, you look at - they have problems - you can relate to people, it really alleviates, gives us energy, revitalises us, this makes us feel. We mostly feel we are a national movement, and when we come here we realise that we also have a global movement, and we are always trying to better leverage and do some exchanges, for our children and our youth groups, different countries and introduce different cultures to ours, and for them to understand Palestinians who are **[[inaudible]]**.

IM: Incredible, incredible. Has there been one stand-out experience or moment, perhaps this week or even in the six months that you've been General Secretary, has there been a moment that has really struck you or impacted you, or given you hope?

PN: Course, there has been plenty of moments. The first one is we had a doctor visit us to talk to us, to help us establish a programme for community development fund, from Kansas City, and she came here, she visited, I introduced her to the rehabilitation programme that we work with children who suffer from political trauma and from disabilities. By the time we had finished the meeting I asked her - can we explain to her our work and what we do - and we asked her to tell us about their programmes so we can benefit. And her response was, when you visit us in October, you will be the one that we trust to do the teaching. So this encourages us.

Secondly, I was, for the first time, I was lucky enough to be Jericho and I graduated this year the 67th class of our vocational training school, which I'll take just one minute to tell you a little bit about. This school offers, for marginalised youth, 15/16+ who are drop-outs from school, who no future, the YMCA takes them in and keep them off the street, they keep them away from extremism, they keep them away from gang violence, by we



teach them a vocation, and this programme is the only way we can do it is by providing boarding as well, so the cost of the child is about \$6,000, about 30% of them are able to pay about £1,000-£1,300. So we have a little 'Change a Life' campaign that I have brochures here if you would like to take them, we encourage you to donate and change a person's life. What we do with any dollar that you send us is to save a life, and you give hope to future generations.

IM: Incredible... incredible. And there's a website address on here and contact so people can find out more about the YMCA East Jerusalem.

PN: Absolutely, absolutely.

IM: Well, Peter thank you so much, and really interesting to hear. I'm privileged to be able to do this, thank you.