

NEAR & FAR

Syracuse University and the Near East Foundation form a strategic alliance that is shaping the future of social and economic development abroad

BY CHRISTINE YACKEL

IN THE HIGH ATLAS MOUNTAINS OF SOUTHERN MOROCCO, GIRLS who once spent their days out in the bush gathering firewood now regularly attend school, thanks to new cook stoves that reduce the amount of fuel needed each day. In the shantytowns of Casablanca, young men now face a brighter future because they are learning how to effectively communicate their needs to local officials. And in the West Bank, where conflict has dominated daily life for decades, Palestinian olive growers and Israeli olive oil producers may soon have an opportunity to build peace through cooperation by creating innovative collective businesses. None of these advances would be possible without the work of the Near East Foundation (NEF), an international aid organization that conducts a variety of economic and social development projects in Africa and the Middle East. “As peace talks are falling apart—stagnating at best—we have Palestinian and Israeli communities ready to strengthen their economic activities and build relationships of trust and mutual interdependence,” says Charles Benjamin, president of the Near East Foundation. “By maintaining intimate relationships with communities over time, we’re able to do a kind of work not many organizations can do.”

For nearly a century, the Near East Foundation has transcended national and religious barriers to help some of the most vulnerable populations of the region achieve more productive lives. Now based at Syracuse University, NEF often succeeds where others fail because it is a non-governmental organization (NGO) with a local face. In a part of the world where so many people are reluctant to work with outsiders—particularly Americans—100 percent of NEF’s development professionals are from the region. “In the international development field, we know of so many instances when NGOs from the West go into these countries with good intentions and really screw things up because they don’t have the cultural sensitivities needed,” says Professor Mehrzad Boroujerdi, director of Syracuse University’s Middle Eastern Studies Program and an NEF board member. “Development work needs context and networking, and NEF has earned the trust and respect of the local communities because they know it doesn’t have a political or religious agenda.”

MISSION OF MERCY

Near East Relief, as NEF was known originally, was created in 1915 to help rescue an estimated 1.5 million Armenian refugees after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire



MALI



MOROCCO



“

By maintaining intimate relationships with communities over time, we're able to do a kind of work not many organizations can do.”

CHARLES BENJAMIN
President of the Near East Foundation



at the outbreak of World War I. Henry Morgenthau, American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, sent an urgent telegram asking the U.S. government to provide humanitarian assistance for Armenians and other minorities displaced by the upheaval. Upon learning of the refugees' plight, President Woodrow Wilson asked his best friend and college roommate, Cleveland Dodge, to help raise money for a rescue mission. Dodge pulled together a group of prominent businessmen and politicians to form the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, which officially became the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (Near East Relief) after an act of Congress in 1919.

The relief committee's mandate was to raise \$100,000, but it wound up raising \$117 million over 15 years, providing care for Armenian, Greek, Syrian, and Persian refugees, including 132,000 orphaned children. Trustee Emeritus Sam Goekjian '52, who is Armenian, was born on the Greek island of Syros at a Near East Relief-sponsored orphanage, where his father was director of the boys' school and his mother taught the girls. "The orphanage was financed completely by Near East Relief, and they also set up food distribution centers, schools, hospitals, and vocational training centers to help people transition to a new life," says Goekjian, whose twin brother, Gregory, graduated from Syracuse University in 1953. "Near East Relief was a household name at the beginning of the 20th century, but now it's the oldest and most important international aid organization almost no one has heard of."

CITIZEN PHILANTHROPY

Americans have always been willing to lend a helping hand, but the massive outpouring of concern for Armenian refugees was the first time the general public became involved in humanitarian relief abroad, giving birth to the movement known as "citizen philanthropy." There were Near East Relief committees in all 48 states and the territories of Alaska and Hawaii, as well as Australia, Japan, England, Cuba, and some European countries. More than 1,400 volunteers went to the region. Posters depicting Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam rescuing Armenian orphans rallied patriotic Americans to take up the cause. Churches organized food and clothing drives, communities held fund-raising events, and children who refused to clean their plates were admonished to "Remember the starving Armenians."



It's about the generations that come after and the opportunities they will have going forward."

SHANT MARDIROSSIAN
Board chair of NEF



MALI



Shant Mardirossian, board chair of NEF, says the most recent example of citizen philanthropy is the grassroots response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. “Our work is not just about the individuals we help directly,” Mardirossian says. “It’s about the generations that come after and the opportunities they will have going forward. It’s amazing to me that this philanthropic enterprise—which was the blueprint for President Truman’s Point-4 Program, the Marshall Plan, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Development Program, and the Peace Corps—is not in the history books to the extent it should be. So we’re now in the process of cataloging and digitizing our extensive archives, and we hope to have a documentary film and virtual museum about NEF’s remarkable history completed in time for our centennial celebration in 2015.”

A NEW CHAPTER

When the Armenian relief effort came to a successful conclusion in 1930, Near East Relief changed its name to the Near East Foundation and shifted its focus from humanitarian relief to social and economic development—an innovative approach that inspired a way of engaging the world that was unprecedented at the time. “You hear about so many bad things going on in the Middle East, but there’s so much good going on there, too,” Benjamin says. “In the areas where we work, NEF is partially responsible for the positive things that are happening. Stability and prosperity in this part of the world are important for humanitarian and geopolitical reasons.”

NEF’s ability to survive—and thrive—in this volatile part of the world is a testament to the dedication and resourcefulness of its founders, board members, and staff. The organization relies on financial support from individuals, foundations, corporations, and such government entities as USAID to fund three full-time administrative staff at home and 70 field agents abroad who are currently conducting projects in Egypt, Armenia, Jordan, Morocco, Mali, Sudan, and the Palestinian Territories in four key areas: building peace through economic cooperation; natural resource management and

climate change; civic engagement; and women’s education and business development. “As a result of our girls’ primary education project in remote mountain villages of Morocco, attendance jumped from 0 to 98 percent with a 95 percent retention rate,” Benjamin says. “This is transformative, not only for the girls, but also for their communities and families.”

In 2009, NEF’s board started exploring new ways of doing business that would reduce administrative costs at home and strengthen its fieldwork abroad. One option was for the foundation to affiliate with a university. Benjamin got in touch with his former doctoral advisor and mentor at the University of Michigan, Steven Brechin, now a sociology professor at Maxwell, to discuss the possibility of partnering with Syracuse University. “Charlie and the NEF board were interested in the Maxwell School and a connection with our master of public administration (M.P.A.) program,” Brechin says. “I told him the graduate students coming out of our program are first rate, and he was excited by the prospect of engaging with students and tapping into the University’s intellectual resources. Being separate but physically connected to a university was a brilliant idea.”

A NEW HOME

The Near East Foundation relocated from New York City—its home for 95 years—to an office in Crouse-Hinds Hall a year ago. “After considering a number of universities as potential partners, the NEF board decided Syracuse University was the best fit for our organization,” Benjamin says. “The whole idea of Scholarship in Action just resonates with what we’re trying to do.” Boroujerdi thinks the alliance with SU will allow NEF to continue to grow and improve as an organization while enriching the educational experience of students. “We can help move NEF into the 21st century,” he says. “We have these technologically savvy kids who can clean up NEF’s database and create vision plans. And our students are full of energy and eager to put classroom learning into practice.”

In the past year, Benjamin worked with 11 student interns from Maxwell on a variety of projects, including program-

Charles Benjamin (top left), president of the Near East Foundation (NEF). Above right, Benjamin and NEF board chair Shant Mardirossian discuss the agenda for an NEF board meeting held on campus in June.



Palestinian Territories



For a complete listing of current NEF projects, go to sumagazine.syr.edu.



I'm not familiar with any other university that has this kind of a connection to an NGO."

WILLIAM SULLIVAN
Assistant dean
for external relations,
Maxwell School



THE CORPS CONNECTION

MODELED, IN PART, ON THE NEAR East Foundation, the Peace Corps has been promoting peace and friendship for 50 years. Syracuse University's close relationship with the Peace Corps began in the early '60s when the University was selected as a volunteer training center, particularly because the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs was developing a program of study and research known as the East Africa Regional Program.

From 1962 to 1966, 450 young men and women came to campus to prepare for assignments in Liberia, Malawi, and Tanzania. Volunteers spent 10 hours a day, six days a week in language training, cultural and political orientation, instruction in basic nursing techniques, and learning to drive a Jeep.

Today, Syracuse University is one of the top Peace Corps volunteer-producing schools in the nation, with 36 undergraduate alumni currently serving abroad. The Peace

Corps ranks volunteer-producing schools according to the size of the student body, placing SU 11th among medium-sized colleges and universities in 2011. To date, 760 SU alumni have served as Peace Corps volunteers.

Rachael Saler '06 (pictured at left) of Norwich, Vermont, is serving in the Philippines, where she is developing small businesses with women who crochet purses out of recycled plastic bags. Since launching the "Bag-O-Plastic" project in August 2010, more than 100 women have generated income by selling their colorful beach bags and purses to tourists. "As a social work major, I received a well-rounded education and gained both theoretical and practical skills that have helped me in my community development work," Saler says. "Serving as a Peace Corps volunteer has been a life-changing experience—so much so that I have extended my 27-month commitment an extra year."

matic and analytical work, project management, fund-raising strategies, and project development. Sarah Peterson '10, who was involved with strategic planning for NEF through her public administration and international relations master's degree capstone project, is now the foundation's program officer responsible for providing technical support to staff in the field. "There's a lot of back and forth with the staff, so I spend most of my day on Skype," says Peterson, who thought she would have to leave Syracuse to find a job with an NGO. "I don't know how all of this work was done before the Internet existed."

Toma Grigoryan '09, who was 4 years old when she and her family arrived in Syracuse as refugees from Azerbaijan, interned with NEF working on issues relating to her family's Armenian roots. "I did a double take when I saw the word 'Armenian' on SU's internship web site," says Grigoryan, who entered the M.P.A. program this summer. "Improving the lives of Armenians is my passion, so I was thrilled to have an opportunity to help Armenian entrepreneurs start micro-franchises in information technology and the fruit-drying business. None of this would have been possible without the NEF internship—it fit me perfectly."

MOVING FORWARD

William Sullivan, Maxwell's assistant dean for external relations, says this strategic alliance affords NEF all the benefits a vibrant university setting has to offer, while providing SU students with a learning laboratory that makes their educational experience truly unique. A newly created fellowship program will enable recent graduates to assess the effectiveness of programs in the field, and faculty have ready-made research sites in Africa and the Middle East. "I'm not familiar with any other university that has this kind of a connection to an NGO," says Sullivan, who sits on the NEF board. "With all of the changes sweeping the Middle East, there are populations faced with building whole new societies and this is all about what we teach in our professional programs and undergraduate social science courses. It's an exciting time for us to have an NGO right here on campus that works in such a critical part of the world. It gives us an opportunity to educate more people, conduct in-depth research, and run more training programs. It's going to get really interesting."

NEF has its deepest ties with the Maxwell School, but plans to expand collaborations university-wide are already under way. In the past year, NEF and SU submitted joint grant proposals that neither would be able to secure on its own. "Our first joint proposal was the cross-border Palestinian/Israeli olive oil project, which will make it possible for Maxwell faculty to go to the region on a yearly basis to participate in the reconciliation advisory group," Benjamin says. NEF also is teaming up with the Whitman School to develop an entrepreneurship training module, and partnering with Maxwell's Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration to design a conflict management curriculum, to help Sudanese ex-combatants reintegrate into civil society and set up small businesses as an alternative to warfare.

Syracuse University and the Near East Foundation are just beginning to see the impact of their visionary joint venture. "Although NEF will remain independent from SU, I would like it to become so interconnected with the University academically and programmatically that it comes to be viewed as Syracuse University's very own NGO," Benjamin says. "The experience of moving to Syracuse, working with student interns, developing proposals with faculty and staff, and designing tools to do our work more efficiently has been really intense. What an amazing first year!" «

