

Palestine Marathon

Bethlehem, 2017

On 29th March, 2017, 17 people from the UK descended on Bethlehem, Palestine. Our mission? To take part in the Palestine Marathon and raise as much money as possible for Action around Bethlehem Children with Disability.

We had an action-packed schedule as, as well as taking part in the marathon, we also wanted to utilise the trip as a field visit to as many of ABCD's projects as possible. Here's how it went.

Thursday:

Up early. Travel time to our destination of Nour Shams in the Tulkarem region of Palestine to the north was 2 and a half hours. With our fantastic Trustee and Project Manager, Firas Sarhan with us, who is Palestinian, we have to take a detour around the city of Jerusalem as he is not permitted to travel through it. This adds at least an hour onto our journey. The roads are dusty and bumpy and incorporate the Valley of Hell which is a 10 mile stretch of hairpin bends zig zagging down steep mountains and up the other side. Nour Shams refugee camp is home to one of ABCD's latest projects. Two years ago, we refurbished, equipped and staffed a Rehabilitation Centre there which is now going from strength to strength. It has two large treatment rooms all equipped with climbing bars, walking galley, mats, balls, mirrors, physio cage and much more. In these rooms a physiotherapist, speech therapist and occupational therapist get to work daily seeing a range of children from babies to teens with conditions such as Cerebral Palsy, Autism, Downs or Amputees.

When we get there, we are met by a local television network who are there to report on Nour Shams Rehabilitation Centre and ABCD's exchange of contracts ensuring funding for the next five years. The signing of them is not unlike a Peace Treaty with photos and camera's everywhere and a sense of achievement and relief.

We spend the day filming and documenting work being done and sit and talk to the Head of the centre and the Therapists to find out how things are and what more can be done.

We arrive back in Bethlehem at 8.30pm, shattered but happy with the days work done.



Friday:

Marathon Day! We arrive down to breakfast clad in our ABCD Team t-shirts ready for the race. So as to avoid the heat of the day the race starts at 8.30am and by 7.30am Manger Square in the centre of Bethlehem is a sea of excited men, women and children. Our partners in Bethlehem, The Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation are there too with 180 disabled marathon participants. The atmosphere is electric if not a bit chaotic. Once we've fought through the crowds to get to the start, we're off. We set our own paces straight away and I am on my own for the next 13 miles. Slow and steady wins the race (or at least completes it) and I am determined to take in the amazing sites as I run through. The route takes us through the old city of Bethlehem, starting at the Church of Nativity, and then past the Separation Wall and Banksy's thought provoking 'Walled Off' Hotel and finally through two of Bethlehem's refugee camps... Amazing, eye opening and humbling all at the same time.

We all make it back to the finish with a variety of walkers and runners doing 10km or half marathons and none of us can hide our feeling of elation! WE DID IT!!! As a cumulative, the group ran or walked 210km in less than three hours... not a bad achievement as athletes we are not!

No rest for the wicked however, as once showered we are up to Beit Jala and to The Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation to have a look at the hospital there which ABCD has helped build over the last 35 years and to see progress on the new Sensory Garden for the children which ABCD has funded as part of the Georgina Mortimer Memorial. Georgina and Val Jourdan set up the charity 35 years ago. Sadly, Georgina passed away last year.

That evening we relax and go back the The Walled Off for a well-earned glass of wine and take in the Worst View in the World.



Saturday:

With a good night's sleep, we were off the following morning to Jalazone, near Ramallah. This is the second refugee camp where ABCD has refurbished, equipped and staffed a Rehabilitation centre. Like Nour Shams, living here is tough. It's crowded, has little in the way of sanitation, power and water can be sporadic and the roads and alleys are uneven and dusty to say the least, making using a wheelchair virtually impossible. The day takes on a similar vein to Thursday when we visited Nour Shams camp. Filming and documenting was done along with talks about where their biggest challenges lay and, as with Nour Shams, the ceremonious exchange of contracts, guaranteeing funding for the next five years. This was an eye opener for those who had not been to a refugee camp before and to experience, first hand, what day to day life is like for these people.



Sunday:

Home! After a morning of mooching around the narrow streets of Bethlehem, we pack up and return to the airport. Leaving is always difficult. The Palestinian people are so warm and generous and live their lives with such dignity that you can't help feel we are missing something here in the West.

As yet, we only have a rough guide to how much we raised but we hope to break the £15,000 barrier.

I would like to thank everyone who took part in this amazing trip. It was team building and life affirming and a lot of giggles! We were lucky enough to have an amazing documentarian willing to give her time for free to come and document ABCD's work and the marathon itself. Once the film and photos have been edited I will ensure that it is available for all those who wish to see it.

And finally, a HUGE thank you to everyone who sponsored us on our adventure. Without you, it would have been fun, but worthless. You have given hope and happiness to some beautiful children whose only fault is circumstance and who struggle every day in pain and despair. Thank you.

Lara

P.S. ABCD funds Rehabilitation Centres in two refugee camps in Palestine. There are twenty in total. Our work here has only just begun. If you haven't already, please sponsor this great team of everyday people who set out to do something extraordinary.

You can sponsor us at <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/bethlehemmarathon>

www.abcdbethlehem.org