

JULINDA ABU NASR: TO STRIVE, TO SEEK, TO FIND, AND NOT TO YIELD

When asked by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World to write a tribute to Julinda Abu Nasr on the occasion of her retirement in October, 1997, my mind went back to the short period of time I worked with her as editor of the *Al-Raida* issue on **Women and Literature**. In that short span, Julinda stood out as a devoted and inspiring leader of a diverse group of hard working dedicated women. Her style of leadership was a new and inexhaustible source of knowledge for me of how to motivate the people working under you, stimulate creativity, promote a spirit of exploration and get incredible output from them. This realization and the uneasy feeling I felt about simplifying a person in a few hackneyed phrases incited me to talk to people who worked with her to find out at close hand what they thought of her. There was no hesitation on the part of those I got in touch with. They were enthusiastic and had a genuine desire to talk about a woman they had sincere admiration for.

Dr. Riyad Nassar, President of the Lebanese American University, described her as "highly committed, serious and professional." In the last twenty five years, Julinda "has succeeded in moving the Women's Institute from an embryonic stage to a very well-established and highly reputed organization" and has given a "great name for the preschool education." Those who worked closely with her agreed that she does not compromise when it comes to principles. She is a "perfectionist" though in this imperfect world of ours, this quality can be a liability. She is so demanding, Mrs. Nazha Sadek told me, that she expects people to possess the same kind of commitment she has for the Institute and the University. Her insatiable sense of perseverance and work ethics coupled with passionate love for what she was doing caused her to work furiously at all hours of the day and night. There was a great deal to accomplish and, in that sense, time, for Julinda, was very precious. Her diverse interests that ranged from academic research, to social work aimed at women and children including the teaching of literature, drama and music made her acutely conscious of the urgency

of the matter. How could she not "overload the hours" when, at certain stages, she was engaged in 15-16 projects at the same time. For her, work is a creed and a declaration of faith. No wonder the range and extent of her accomplishments.

A Professor of Child Psychology at the Lebanese American University since 1960, Julinda established the Women's Institute in October 1973 and remained Director of the Institute and the University's Laboratory for Preschool Education until her retirement at the end of the academic year 1996-1997. In Julinda's view, it was her Protestant upbringing that molded her personality and made her the "caring" person she is. The missionaries in the Sidon Evangelical School where she studied, as well as her mother who was a graduate of the same school, had a strong impact on her. They taught her that one should not live in an oasis, but reach out for the community and offer help. The motto of the Sidon American School remains with her: "Better to light a candle than curse the darkness."

In 1975, at the start of the civil war in Lebanon, Julinda went to Egypt and instead of spending three days there as was initially scheduled, she remained in Egypt because there was no safe way to return home. Instead of sitting around and despairing over the situation, she decided to do some constructive work. That's when she discovered at close hand the state of oppression and misery Arab women and children are subjected to and began to see another role to the university than the purely academic one. She realized that the university has another equally important mission and that is to bridge the gap between the various sectors of society, rich and poor. This feeling gave her a strong sense of responsibility for the underprivileged, those who are less fortunate. She was convinced that to build a country one has to address the needs of people who are deprived

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and marginalized. Having no one to support them or to alleviate their sorrows, Julinda decided to be their “champion.” At this point, she began to envisage a different role for the Institute. Initially intended as an academic unit to enhance research by faculty members on women’s issues and design curricula on women’s studies and child development, Julinda felt the need to respond to new challenges generated by the war that broke out in 1975. She needed only to look around her to see women and children displaced from their homes and suffering the effects of a brutal civil war and in desperate need of help. That’s where the idea of Basic Living Skills and numerous other projects came from.

Such work would not have been accomplished without the strong sense of solidarity that prevailed in the Institute. Julinda understood the importance of delegating power and insisted on promoting group work. When working on Rural Development and the creation of modal villages in Akkar, Mrs. Sadek told me, the group on the site wanted to consult with her on some tricky issue. Her reaction was: “You are there. Use your own judgment and act accordingly.” Julinda has a “knack for bringing out the best in people” as Mrs. Lydia Daher told me. Those who work with her have no choice but to excel and show their true mettle. The Akkar program is one among a number of rural development programs that the Institute was actively engaged in that include workshops to develop social and political awareness, income generating activities and social and legal literacy activities. Julinda was also engaged in a Basic Living Skills Program designated to generate social awareness among women, teach illiterate and semi-literate women, train displaced and rural women in marketable skills to enable them to earn an income, and develop positive self concepts in women.

As far as Julinda is concerned, academic work is important particularly when it predetermines practical work done in the community. Julinda was one of the first to apply an integrated approach to development. In her view, such an approach, which she adopted as early as the 1970’s, is practical, feasible and functional. Possessing a uniquely “creative style,” as Miss Hoda Butros refers to it, enabled her to look at an objective without being overwhelmed by apparent difficulties and to find

the ways and means to achieve it. This “can do” attitude fostered a feeling that obstacles can always be surmounted. “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” has remained Julinda’s motto throughout. Julinda has no fear of failure: “I have a strong belief that if you really want something, you will get it.” Even when her knowledge of a particular issue or subject is deficient, she makes a point of pursuing the subject and learning about it.

Julinda has gone out of her way to assist children who need help and has managed to recruit a Canadian team to come annually to Lebanon and train social workers in dealing with traumatized children. As Director of the Women’s Institute, she organized various workshops to train preschool and elementary school teachers in innovative teaching techniques, social workers, community development workers in dealing with traumatized children and school librarians in modern techniques of setting up children’s libraries. She has served as consultant on early childhood programs for UN agencies, the Kuwait Society for the Advancement of Arab Children, Save the Children Fund, Middle East Council of Churches training program, and many others. She has organized and conducted training sessions for preschool teachers in Lebanon, Bahrain, and Kuwait, and has organized various workshops in collaboration with the Goethe Institute on Children’s Literature, Children’s Libraries, Music as an Educational Tool, and Children of War. With over twenty publications to her credit, Julinda is a member of several organizations such as the YWCA, World Organization for Early Childhood Education, the Asian Women’s Institute, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. She is founder and president of the Lebanese Board on Books for Young People which is affiliated to the International Board on Books for Young People.

Acutely conscious of the dangerous influence of war on children, Julinda decided to offset the atmosphere of violence and aggression by providing models with acceptable moral and social values. This was done by setting up projects such as sponsoring children’s plays as well as puppet shows. A puppet theater group (organized and trained by the

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Institute) has performed in over 150 schools to 30,000 children who watch the show yearly and receive a free book. The Institute has also been engaged in organizing selected Book Exhibits, training writers and illustrators of Children's Books and organizing the Portable Library. Having been the first to introduce the idea of the portable library in Lebanon in response to basic

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needs to counterbalance the war atmosphere, now, in times of peace, the Institute provides portable libraries to social centers, orphanages, hospitals, schools, and remote rural areas to motivate children to read and discover the joy of reading. At the same time it serves as a therapeutic medium for children with emotional, social and physical problems. With such aims in mind, the Institute has managed to distribute over 250 libraries in different

parts of Lebanon. Miss Butros told me that her "remote village in North Lebanon as well as the village of Jebayel received a portable library from the Institute."

Her deep insight and "acute intelligence" makes her "a shrewd judge of people," as Rose Ghurayyib described it. When she discovers hidden talent, she goes out of her way to promote it. Julinda has a "young spirit," says Miriam Sfeir, and is always ready to promote and encourage young people who are still pure and uncorrupted by the system. If she cannot tolerate mediocrity and laziness, she has a lot of patience with young people and is ready to give them assistance and help at all levels. As Ghina Ismail put it "Julinda is sensitive, loving, warm and understanding when it comes to the young." This interest in young people prompted her, when she was first appointed by the University to run the Institute, to insist on teaching at least one course to remain in contact with young people. Despite the remarkable work she has done, Julinda insists that she is, first and foremost, a teacher and educator.

Julinda's eternal commitment to all issues related to women can be seen in the vast and incredible amount of work she has done to promote the cause of women in Lebanon and the Arab world. At the strictly academic level, she has engendered courses in women's studies that are presently offered through various Divisions at the Lebanese American University. In order to enhance the academic role it has continued to

play, the Institute has acquired a vast number of books and periodicals (over 500 books and 200 periodicals) on national and international issues related to women. Another publication *Al-Raida*, a quarterly journal, was established in 1976 to increase knowledge on social, economic and legal conditions in the Arab World, enhance networking among women around the world and promote communication among individuals, groups, and institutions concerned with Arab women. In addition, a number of books in English as well as Arabic on issues related to women and children have been published by the Institute.

Because the bulk of her work was accomplished in the erratic years of the war, planning took place at the level of two to three alternatives. If it was not possible to hold a conference in Lebanon, Julinda was ready to go to Cyprus, or Jordan, or the United States for that matter. Julinda has organized a number of conferences on issues related to women such as one on Lebanese Women and the Environment, Arab Women and the Environment and others. She has also served as consultant on Economic Contributions of Arab Women and Continuing Education for Arab Women with the governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia and Morocco as well as with agencies including the UNICEF, UNESCO, AGFUND, UCWA, Ford Foundation, FAO and ILO.

Despite the incredible academic and practical contributions she has made in areas related to women and children, self-promotion has always been contrary to her principles and her nature. The lure of publicity has never succeeded in distracting Julinda from her mission. Julinda has always preferred to work and remain behind the scenes. When it comes to the media, or any form of publicity or self-promotion, she has always kept a low profile: "What really matters is for the Institute and the University to be represented." Julinda has built a legacy and has done it with integrity and an amazing sense of duty and dedication. We will always remember this woman of vision with gratitude and admiration, but we will not despair for we know that the new Director of the Woman's Institute, Mrs. Mona Khalaf, has all the qualities that will enable her to carry on where Julinda has left and continue to strive for exciting goals and new horizons.

Samira Aghacy
Professor of English
Lebanese American University