



 HUMANS of
Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom

By Jacky
Sherman

Design by
Oso Bayo



HUMANS of Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom



is a collection of personal stories shared by people who are part of the extraordinary Arab Jewish community of Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom.

Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom (WASNS) means Oasis of Peace in Arabic and Hebrew.

Situated between Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv the community was established in 1970 by Father Bruno Hussar on land given by the Latrun Monastery.

The community has since established educational institutions based on its ideals of justice, tolerance, and peace to lead social and political change. There are seventy families living in WASNS, with plans to expand to one hundred and fifty.





“We had in mind a small village composed of inhabitants from different communities in the country. Jews, Christians and Muslims would live there in peace, each one faithful to his own faith and traditions, while respecting those of others. Each would find in this diversity a source of personal enrichment.

People would come here from all over the country to meet those from whom they were estranged, wanting to breakdown the barriers of fear, mistrust, ignorance, misunderstanding, preconceived ideas – all things that separate us – and to build bridges of trust, respect, mutual understanding, and, if possible, friendship.”

Bruno Hussar

Founder of Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom

Nur Najjar

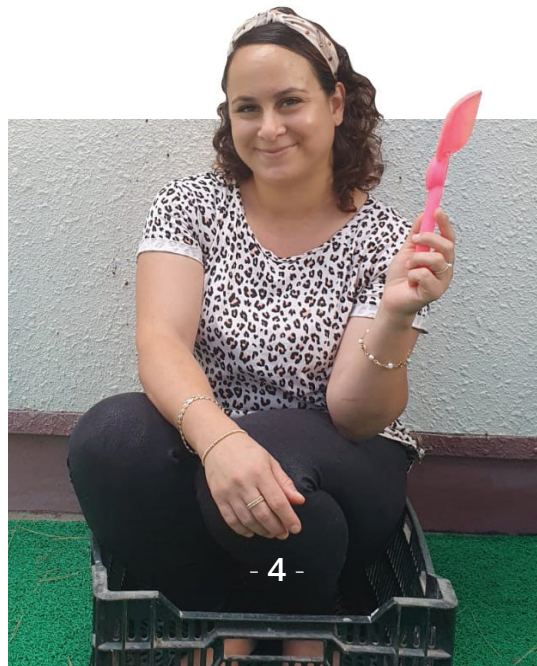
Daughter of Abdessalam and Aisha Najjar, the first Arab family to live in the village



I was born in Wahat al Salam–Neve Shalom. I am 31 years old. I have two children, aged 3 and 5. I have worked in the village childcare for the last two years. I was brought up here, in the same building where today I care for other children. When parents come to visit the kindergarten, it gives them confidence that I grew up here and also that Aisha is my mother. (Aisha is a founder of the village). I was lucky that she worked in childcare when I was growing up as she was also able to look after me outside of the home. My childhood memories of family life and being part of this community are really happy. I knew that I wanted my children to have this experience too. It's usual in Arab culture for the wife to settle in the village or town where her husband is from. My husband is from Rahat in the South, but like me, he understood that WASNS is the best choice for our family. My mother, brother and one sister live here. I have another sister living in the North. She is building a house in the village and will come back when it is ready. I would also like to build here but there is a shortage of land, so for now we are renting a small home. All the family gets together once every week or two and that's always a lot of fun.

I have many hobbies. I am certified as an aerobics, Zumba and kickboxing instructor. I love sport and I love to work out. My husband is a footballer. He plays for Bnei Lod. Before we had children, we lived in Ashdod, Ramle, Nahariya and Nazareth – wherever he played football became our home. My husband

Nur at work in the kindergarten of Wahat al–Salam Neve Shalom and as a child growing up there.



trains everyday and the whole family goes to watch him on the weekends. I went to the Primary School here. Some of the teachers that taught me are still teaching in the school. You won't find another school like it. The school offers so much more than textbook learning. As there is no High School in the village I continued my education at the Orthodox Christian School in Ramle. It was quite different, a much more formal way of learning and I missed the openness and alternative teaching methods from WASNS.

My dream is for me, my sisters and brother to continue to live here so we can pass on what my mother and father began. I want to live and work in this community and give what we have been given to our children.

I am really committed to this community. There is a vision here and the education we give our children is part of that vision. My children will study here until they finish the Primary School. If there was a High School they would stay!

I'm due to start a course in informal education for young children. It's a two year course and I'll have to study in the evenings. I'm also in the middle of a BA in Behavioural Science. I decided to take the course in informal education because it's a good professional fit for me and I see there's a need for kindergarten teachers in the community. At the moment I work in the kindergarten with a Jewish lady named Miriam who comes from outside the village. She is wonderful, we complement each other. She's like my mother and we really work well together.



Nur and Miriam

Eden Ben Shabat

Eden moved to Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom in fifth grade



I'm a student living in Tel Aviv. I am studying Economics and Data Science. We moved to the village when I was 10. I was in the fifth grade, but I studied in the WASNS primary school from first grade, so when people ask me where am I from, I always say I was born here. After the Primary School I went to the local high school and then I joined the army. This was a controversial choice among people in the village.

I'm concerned about what is happening here and in the Middle East and I'm thinking about what I want to do with the next stage of my life. I go back a lot to the Village because I love it. My childhood friends, eight of us grew up together



and most of us went to high school together. But then the army started to become an issue, around the time that I was 16. In my group of friends I was the only Jewish guy, so the issue of serving in the army was only relevant to me. At 16 I did *Gadna*, a kind of taster of the army. The issue of me serving in the army started to put our friendship to the test and we talked about it a lot. Most of my friends didn't understand my choice to serve. I gave it a huge amount of thought and I decided to join the army. I felt as a citizen of this country I had to do it. I think Israel needs an army in order to exist but, at the same time, I feel it is a tool being used for political decisions that I don't agree with, like the Occupation. I made my choice and in the end my friends

accepted it and we would meet up on the weekends when I came home. It wasn't easy at all, but we managed to pass it.

This to me is proof that Neve Shalom puts something deep in your soul and whatever happens outside, we cannot deny our friendships, which are stronger than everything.

Since finishing the army I feel that there is less and less interest among my friends to discuss political issues. People just want to live and progress economically and personally. There's a frustration about discussing things and seeing that nothing happens. I find myself in recent years raising issues, trying to create change. I find myself as a Jew living in Neve Shalom arguing a lot with Jewish Israelis. When I go out of the village I'm viewed as left wing and in the village I'm seen as right wing. When I tell people where I'm from, most people have heard of it, some have not. Most people think it's a sort of naive peace and I have to explain how it is to live here. People want to know if we have a real solution to the conflict here and want to know if it really works. They like the idea that we, Jews and Arabs have chosen to live together, but they want to know how it affects the general situation. The main question that people ask, and I always know when it's coming, is if there are any mixed couples in the village.

I like living outside the village now. I'm in my 20s and I'm at the time in my life when it feels good to get out and get a bit of action. I want to experience being in a city. My wish is to go back to Neve Shalom and raise my children there. The Jews in Neve Shalom have many options. I can go wherever I want and I won't feel a problem, but for the Arabs they can't go back to the villages they came from and they also can't live in Jewish towns and cities because they won't feel included.

Ramez Mannaa

Ramez was born in the village



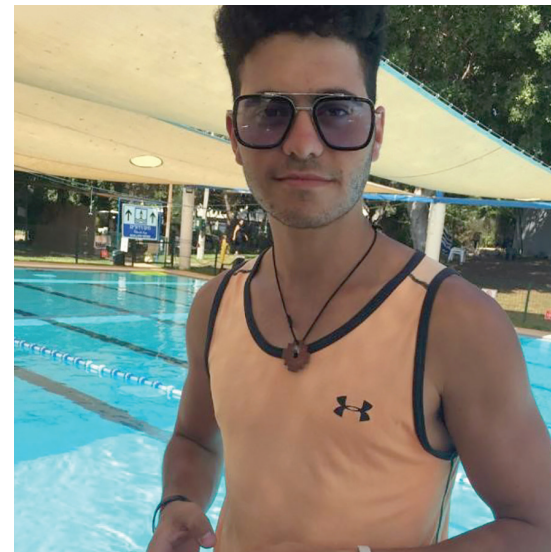
I'm a student at Ben Gurion University, studying computer engineering. I'm 21 and moved out of the village two years ago. I spent one year in Haifa where I did a pre-academic course and then one year in Beer Sheva where I did the first year of my degree. I lived by myself there for a year and then I came back to Neve Shalom.

I think it's the wrong message to say that Neve Shalom is special. We're all people and this way of living should be normal. We're all human beings. Living in the village is a kind of political activity, because what we are doing here is not the norm. It's a protest.

I like to engage in conversations about politics, but it's not a big part of my life. I care mostly about my family, my friends and being happy.

Growing up here was great, a really wonderful bubble. The school was close to my home and I knew everyone in the village. I was surrounded by family and friends. When I was born in 1999 there were only about one hundred and fifty people living here. I went to the kindergarten and Primary School here and then for Middle and High School I went to Tsafit Regional High School which is on a kibbutz south of the village. It was a big change to go to school outside of our community. It was tough at the beginning, but after a couple of years it was good.

There were only four people my age in the village and so we became friends with other children who were a year or two older or younger than us. Today we are a group of about fifteen friends from the village, five of whom I'm especially close



to. One lives here, one is in the army, two are in university and one is in Eilat. I have friends all over in many different circles, in Haifa, Beer Sheva and Modiin where I worked as a lifeguard.

I was also employed by the village hotel as a lifeguard in the pool but both swimming pools are now closed because of Corona. It was especially fun to work at the swimming pool here as I was able to hang out with my friends while working. Now I'm working in a pharmacy which is much less fun while I study. Before University I took a gap year. I earned money and then went to the States with my Mum to visit family.

During my first year at university I lived in an apartment in Beer Sheva. I was looking for the perfect person to share with me – a woman, someone clean and quiet, studying a subject similar to me, but I didn't find her, so I lived alone. I enjoyed it. You can sleep when you want and eat when you want. I realised at that time you know something is important to you when you no longer have it. I missed my home, my family and my friends. I liked student life. It was fun but I also had to work hard because the subject I am studying is challenging. Some people say student days are the best years of your life... But I want every year to be better than the previous one!

Even though I like programming and maths, I don't want to sit in front of a computer all my life. I want something else as well, maybe to write a book or to have my own business. I still have time to decide. It's tough studying online all the time. I miss my student life, parties, girls... However, being with my parents is good too. As I've become older my Mum and Dad have become more like friends. I am the youngest in my family. I have two much older brothers. Since I was about fourteen it was just me and my parents at home. Both of my brothers are married. One lives in Cyprus and the other is living in Petach Tikva whilst his house is being built here in the village. If I could, I would live here forever but probably I'll move close to wherever I work.

There are so many things I enjoy doing. I've played the guitar since I was seven. I love all kinds of music, sports, computers and technology. Sports, friends and travelling are a big part of my life. I really like going to the beach, sometimes going to a bar or out to eat. Eating, drinking and laughing. These are the things I love to do the most!

Omer Schwartz

Born and raised in the village until age 21, Omer returned fourteen years later in 2019 with his wife, Genia



I'm a storyteller. I'm a producer. I'm an entrepreneur. I'm a creator. I work from the point of view that the individual has the power to change the world. I am trying to be accurate in my dream-fulfilling work.

I was raised here (in WASNS). It wasn't my decision to be part of this. I left at the age of 21 and I came back a year ago. I came back married, with my wife and her son.

I love building and contributing to community life so we're opening a pub here. It's going to be a pub on wheels and we're going to bring the people to it and create a community. It will open once a week and we will move locations within the village and give neighbours the chance to meet and connect without an agenda. I know that when people hang out in a non-stressful environment it's easier for them to connect and laugh.

When I was in Jerusalem, I opened a co-creative work space, a place for my film studio, workshops, events and production. I built a community there around events and creativity. I was a community builder. I did this for ten years. Then

I went on sabbatical and I travelled in Israel and the Far East to explore and learn about different communities. In Israel I stayed mostly with one community, a farm in Emek Yizrael. I volunteered and meant to stay for just one month, but ended up staying for six. I was in charge of volunteers



and I worked in the fields. Each day was something different: harvesting, digging or teaching. One day I organized a cooking class. During this time, I always kept on running my business part time.

I met my wife Genia through my work. She's an actress. We worked together. I closed my business. I had what I call a successful failure. I closed the studio. I felt like I had completed an intensive ten year course in business and people management. I closed it and said I need to take time out and reflect. It wasn't time for a relationship. But when I was away I imagined it would be good for me to be together with Genia. In 2018 we became close and I told her what I thought.

Since I was a teenager in Neve Shalom. I felt like I had a huge burden on my shoulders. It's too much to have on people's shoulders the entire burden and heaviness of the Jewish–Arab, Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It's too much to assume we represent it or that we will solve it. I never thought I would come back to live here. In 2015 I did Vipassana meditation courses and released old versions of

myself and found a huge variety of ways to look at my existence, and one day I started looking at Neve Shalom. Now I see the place more lightly.



I don't see Jews and Arabs anymore. I see people. I don't need to be Israeli Jewish. I can be Omer. I don't need my Palestinian friend to be Arab. He can just be Ibrahim. It doesn't mean I am ignoring his background and who he is. But it means I see the human inside and can give unconditional love and trust.

Nothing is certain, but for now I am putting my energies here.

My parents' generation, who founded the village, volunteered during the beginning and it was really hard for them. For us, the second generation, it is so much easier to come here without the tensions. I didn't plan to come back to live here. But when I came back from the North to my home in Jerusalem, I saw it had become the center of a building site. I realized I couldn't live in the house whilst it was like that and that I could live in my parents' house. It's a very sweet home with amazing views and surrounded by nature. It felt right to be there especially when I realised I wanted to marry Genia. She has a child who is flourishing here. His name is Lavi. He is seven years old. Thanks to him I fell in love with the village. I relive my childhood memories through him. We go looking for animals, on bike rides, out into the forest and go wild in the swimming pool. We adopted a dog. He considers her his sister. He believes I am a child because we have so much fun together. I am like his big brother.



Genia Snop Schwartz

I arrived here because of Omer. I'd never heard about this place. I never knew it existed. I met Omer when we lived in Jerusalem. We stopped here and visited once. He showed me the house he grew up in. In those seconds I felt an amazing energy from the house and from the community. I was in awe of the special energy here. I didn't know he had plans to come back here. Everything happened so quickly. The renters of the house left and Omer had to leave his apartment. He said he was going to try and go back to the village. For six months I came here twice a week from Tel Aviv. When I came here I felt like I'd stepped on a plane and travelled abroad. I brought my son and I fell in love. It became clear to me that we could live here. I had to wait for my invitation... I waited and you know how men are and then Omer said, why don't you come and live here? I came to the village a year ago. This has been one of the

most significant years of my life. I left Tel Aviv which is so different from here. My life was so busy with cafes, going out every night when I could. I was busy with movies. I'm an actress. The first months here were really hard. We were starting out, getting to know people here and I really had nothing in my calendar. It was me, the birds and the trees. I made compost for the first time ever. It all seemed so gross and unknown. I'm a city girl and it was very hard for me.

During the Coronavirus crisis the big change came. I had to stay here. I couldn't go to Tel Aviv. All my industry had shut down. I left the theatre. We started to build a community here. The parents ran a camp everyday for the children near the Doumia. We played games, made fires. I started to feel really connected to the people and make real friends. Then I got a job offer in the village, to coordinate activities for the children and youth in the summer. I was able to release what I was and things started happening for me. My friends want to come all the time and visit. They are intrigued by this place.

Our house is like a commune. We live in the main area of the house and there are two smaller apartments downstairs where tenants live. Once a week we all sit together and share experiences. It is amazing to have a community. It is so empowering. I had friends as a child but was never part of something that was bigger than me and my private life.

I feel this feeling of community in many layers especially as this village is bi-national. I'm not into politics. I look around with a human perspective. My heart and mind are expanding just by living here in a place that has two languages, two peoples. My son goes to school here and studies Hebrew and Arabic.

I never had any engagement with Arabic. I grew up in Haifa but it is very different from here. It's not really mixed. I didn't have Arab friends or neighbours. Being here brings up a lot of complexity, pain and feelings of guilt which is hard for me. Especially now I work here and have an official role and that comes with responsibilities. If I do any activity it has to be in both languages, Hebrew and Arabic. For instance there was a holiday, Eid Al Adha and a woman called me to do something to celebrate the holiday for all the village. This was a challenge

because I didn't know anything about this festival. I started reading and it was amazing for me to do something for a Muslim holiday with Jewish children. For me it's a matter of sharing cultures and making space for it.

A few days ago we opened a mobile pub. It was such hard work. That night I helped with the bar, with food. There were so many people. It was a big mess.... But to see the smiles... People were so excited. It was the first time there was anything like this here. I feel like we are in a time of growth. There's something new and exciting going on. We have lots of ideas and I hope we can make them happen. I teach Pilates and fitness. I have a group here for people aged 50 and we meet three times a week. They come everytime. I really want to expand the classes and to have a proper studio here. At the moment we meet in one of the classrooms of the School for Peace. There are so many people here who are therapists and artists. We want to create a space where we can have workshops.

I feel that the village is my home now. I need to go out at least once a week. I really feel it is a matter of balance. My family lives in Haifa. I see them rarely because it's far. But when they do come it's really fun. They love coming here and being in nature. I really have a good feeling which I didn't used to have when I lived in Tel Aviv.

Sometimes you feel so small that you don't have any influence. Here I feel like as an individual I have the ability to move things and make change.

I was working in theatre and there is no theatre now (Corona time). It is my first and biggest passion. I am waiting for the theatres to re-open. I had two roles. One in Habima and one in Safta Theatre. In Habima I played Hana Rovina, a famous Jewish actress who lived in Israel. I was filling very big shoes. I'm lucky to play her part. It was fun. I was able to let myself laugh. In Safta I had a role in a very feminine play about three mothers. Each lost a child in a different way and everyday they meet in a park and talk about their lives. It's a little bit deep, dark and tragic. I played the role for a year and a half. Then Corona happened.

I acted and wrote a short movie. It has been accepted in three international film festivals in California, Spain and Romania. I wrote it with a friend. It's called *Acceptance*. It's about a woman who goes on a journey to accept her marriage

is over. It was after my divorce and my friend's divorce. It was like therapy. We worked on it for two years.

When you make a short movie, almost no one watches it in Israel. So when you are accepted to an international festival it's a big thing. It's so hard to make a movie. It was crazy. We really want people to watch it. California and Spain will run an online film festival. Romania may have a real film festival, but it depends on what happens in the world.

I'm proud to say the moment I graduated from acting school I didn't have to do something other than acting in order to make it. I performed in children's and youth theatre. I travelled around the country in a bus. I taught drama in schools for children.

I'm happy I don't have to go around in a van anymore for ten hours a day. That was hard. In Israel when you perform in children's theatre and are part of the cultural education program you have to travel all around the country. I don't miss that. But I do miss acting. I really hope the theatre will reopen soon. Culture is not a privilege, it's a must. It's something that people need in their life. Maybe it will be a cure for Corona, for people to have nutrition for their mind and soul.

Successful First Pub
Night In Wahat
al-Salam Neve Shalom



Tami Kanazawa and Yuval Admony

Residents of the village for seven years



Yuval: We met in Poland in 1994, through a program for young musicians from 40 countries. I looked at the list of participants and supposedly found an “Israeli”: Tami. Little did I know she was Japanese and would become my future wife... We became a couple after a month.

Tami: Yuval is the first Israeli I ever met. I didn’t have much of an idea about his country. I thought Israel was a place with constant fighting, like the Gulf War which I heard about while I was a student in Paris.

After our year in Poland we moved to the US for Yuval to study for his Doctorate at the University of Texas. It was a big step for me to move to a different continent, but I didn’t believe in long distance relationships. I had no concept of what Texas would be like and it seemed so far away.

Yuval: I promised her that once we got there, it would feel quite close!

Tami: We had a wonderful year. We decided to combine our personal relationship with a professional one and become a duo, instead of competing in solo piano competitions one against the other... We chose to go to Canada for an Artist Residency at the Banff Center for the Arts. Yuval believed in our potential and it became our life goal to pursue a career as a performing duo.

We were in Canada for a year. After Poland, USA and Canada, we eventually decided to settle down in one of our home countries. I thought it would be too difficult for a non-Japanese person to settle in Japan. The society is very homogenic and has a unique mentality. I visited Israel several times and thought it was more open as a country of immigrants. It’s also close to Europe.



Yuval: Tami hasn't lived in Japan since the age of 18 so I didn't feel like I was kidnapping her. Later on I visited Japan with Tami on a yearly basis. The longest I stayed there was for a month. It's very magical. Clear codes of behavior. I didn't mind being a foreigner.



Eventually we settled in Israel in 1998. We first rented a flat in Netanya for a couple of years, then in Ra'anana for another two years and eventually lived in Moshav Burgata for 10 years. We were preparing to become home-owners and had blueprints to build a house in a village close

to Beit Shemesh when we saw an advert for a house for sale here in Neve Shalom. We had visited the village in the past and thought it an impossible dream to be able to live here as there were no houses available for sale. The notion that we could join this community which fulfilled Jewish-Arabic coexistence was amazing. We threw away the blueprints to our prospective home and went through the intensive acceptance process to join Neve Shalom. I came to the workshop for candidates with a naive belief that we would all think the same. I was surprised that the left wing Jews were viewed suspiciously by the Arabs in our mixed group. But I understood why; the Arabs had suffered for years living under oppression. Acknowledging this experience, I realised I didn't need to take this personally and continued to pursue what I believe in. Nowadays living together feels very natural and warm.

Although we have ideology in common each person has his own way of thinking and set of beliefs. There are regular issues that come up between residents. It is a relatively small group of people, with some more active than others. We are a living proof that Jews and Arabs can live together in peace.

I think the people here are wonderful. I would like Neve Shalom to be more part of the Israeli consciousness.

Tami and I invited the community to several roof-top concerts in our home to listen to our students and teachers from our Academy and Conservatory. Having a concert with the backdrop of the sunset was quite an experience. We had to have our pianos moved from the downstairs studio to the roof.

We play on one piano with four hands or on two pianos. Over the years we have played in some thirty countries including Israel. Since the Corona virus we have had many cancellations. We lost bookings for many places including countries we haven't visited yet, such as Lithuania.

We teach at the Tel Aviv Music Academy and The Givatayim Conservatory. Recently I completed my book of piano duets for pupils and teachers which includes fables I wrote to make learning theory fun for children. The book was published just before the virus. Since then it has been translated into English. I definitely wish to have it translated into Arabic. Tami also teaches children and adults from the village in our home studio. We rehearse separately and together. When we perform, reviewers sometimes say: "They played in one heartbeat." We always hug before a performance.

Tami: In the beginning my relationship with Yuval was a shock for my parents. When most Japanese people think of Israel, due to the media, they mostly see conflict and terrorism; and assume that Israel is a dangerous place. My parents wondered why I couldn't be with a Japanese boy. So when I told them about us, it was a scandal. But all of a sudden, came a big turn of events, literally overnight... My father suggested that my mother came to Paris and meet Yuval. She got so excited. When she met Yuval she pretended to charge like a bull reacting to a red flag but then gave him a high-five and we enjoyed dinner together in a very happy atmosphere.

Yuval: When I first visited Tami's home we sat down for dinner and the first item on the menu was a huge crab. We were all sitting on the floor – on a tatami mat. I was in cultural shock and Tami's father was laughing at me as I was trying to break open the crab.

Tami: It has been many years since I've lived in Japan. I don't miss the food and lifestyle so much, but I do miss my family and friends. I try to visit my family twice a year. When I go back to Japan I immediately feel at home, as if I've been there all the time. At first Yuval and I went together and performed there yearly. In recent years I've travelled alone. In any case, I'm very used to living here in Israel.

Yuval: Tami is very quick to learn languages. She speaks English, French, Hebrew and Japanese. When we meet up with our Israeli friends, Tami feels very comfortable and has become part of the gang. My family and friends liked her very much immediately and welcomed her in. My parents first met Tami in Hungary. For that special meeting I taught her a few sentences in Hebrew slang which she recited to my parents. They were a little shocked by her colloquial Hebrew and fell in love with her within seconds.

Tami: We have big cultural differences, but because we both grew up as musicians, we have a lot in common. We grew up dedicated from a young age to our piano playing ... I feel Yuval and I grew up in a similar way. Even much more so than me and my brother, who never played piano and turned out very different from me. Yuval and I are closer in our background than two children from the same family because we share a common language through music.

Yuval: Tami taught our cat and dog (Mika and Labane) to be friends



Rita Boulos

Living in the community since 1989



I am a Palestinian citizen of Israel. I have four children and I have four grandchildren. I am active here. I am working to create change, and bring an end to racism, I feel racism and know people are racist and it hurts me. I want to see change in the political arena and I want justice.

I was born in Lod. My father was politically active in the Palestinian movement that was against taking Palestinian lands. He was arrested many times. This all happened before I was born. My father wrote a book about Lod, which was part of a series about cities before 1948 and afterwards. He didn't write the book from the perspective of a historian or writer, but as a witness. He worked as a paramedic, saving lives and he wrote what he saw and what he experienced. For years we knew he was writing a book, but it was a secret book which he hid. When he was a pensioner, he felt freer. He wasn't frightened about being arrested or losing his job and so he published the book in Arabic. People who knew what he had written told him he needed facts to prove what had happened. Years later historic archives were opened to the public by the Israeli government. Benny Morris famously presented a new narrative on 1948 based on his research of these archives. My father's book refers to Benny Morris's work as proof that his account is true. One day I hope to get the book published in Hebrew. It is important that Jews learn our narrative about the past.



I met my husband in Haifa, where I was studying Hebrew and English. We moved to Tel Aviv because of his work and then again to Jerusalem. He worked long hours. We had two children and I was a full time mother. At the beginning of the first intifada I was pregnant with our third child. It was very hard living in Jerusalem at that time. Whilst living in Jerusalem I went with a Jewish friend to a kibbutz swimming pool. The man in charge of entry told us Arabs weren't welcome. I knew I didn't want my children growing up in this situation.

My husband and I chose to move to WASNS. Here I felt I could be more than just a mother, I could be political and active. Here my children could grow up speaking Arabic and learn their history without fear. Here I could raise my children without racism.

We came right at the beginning when there were only eight or nine families living here. There was hardly any running water or electricity and there was nothing. The houses were small. It was not an ideal place to live – not in terms of the physical conditions – but ideologically WASNS was amazing.

Slowly, we were able to enlarge our tiny house. We created a garden. Not just for my home but for the surrounding areas as well. When important guests came to visit the village, we would host them because there really was no formal place for them to go. I worked in the village as a secretary. I spoke Hebrew, Arabic and English and all three languages were needed. I didn't really want to be a secretary but I really wanted to contribute to the community. I had started a course in interior design but I had too much work, and then the Gulf War began. I didn't finish the course.

Part of my job included welcoming guests and taking them around the village. I also looked after the volunteers. This really was the beginning of the Visitors Center. In 2002, I stopped working as a secretary and became the full time director of the Center. Over the years, the Center grew and grew. At first it was mostly visitors from abroad but, at the end of last year a third of the visitors were Jewish Israelis. There were also some Arabs, but less. My work enables me to teach people that there needs to be change. I don't believe any solution will come from violence or war.

I'm not the sort of person that goes out drinking coffee. My husband drinks filter coffee. When our children were young, I would be rushing to get them ready for school. As I left for work, my husband would always hand me a cup of filter coffee just as I got to the front door. I'm less busy now, but he still hands me a coffee as I leave for work. This has been going on for 35 years. My second coffee is after work. My husband and I sit together and drink together in the garden.

Eyas Shbeta

One of WASNS's first residents



I was born in the village of Tira. I was a teacher in a school there. I had a friend who had a connection with a professor from Bar Ilan University. He was doing research on Jewish–Arab relations. He brought Jewish students from surrounding areas for meetings in the school. I couldn't believe this was even happening! The professor told me about a course for young leaders in Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom. The place sounded interesting but I didn't think Jews and Arabs could live together. I felt like Jews and Arabs had nothing to do together. I listened to the professor and promised several times that I would join the course. I missed the first session, but made it to the second. He was very persistent. That was back in 1980.

I arrived at WASNS and it felt like a kibbutz. Often Arabs were taken to kibbutzim for different activities and I thought this was just another place which offered this. There was basically nothing here and I was in shock. There was no public transportation and hardly a road leading here. I thought I'll just stay for the course and that would be all.

Eventually I started spending more time in WASNS than Tira and it was becoming home. At one point I came here for two months and so my Dad came looking for me as there were no phones then. He arrived here and he looked around he saw what was here and he didn't speak. For nearly two hours he didn't speak. He returned to my family home in Tira and didn't say a word. My mother asked me what had I done to him? My Dad thought I had gone mad... I had a house in my parents' village, a job and a stable salary. And yet I was choosing WASNS to be my home.



Of course, this is where I met my wife, Evi (from Switzerland). We had three wedding celebrations. We had a wedding in Switzerland in Zurich town hall followed by a party for 70 people in a friend's (Peter Dreyfus's) garden. It was

a big wedding for Europe. When we came back from Switzerland they made a big big party for us in the village and then we had a wedding in Tira for all of our friends and family. We are the only mixed (Jewish–Arab) couple here in the village. Today we have three girls, who are lovely: Mai, Nadine and Karin.

I can say with pride that this is the only place in the country that I can live. I have taken on many leadership roles in the village including General Village Manager, establishing and managing the School for Peace as the Palestinian partner, developing the Hotel and directing the Communications and Development Department. This is the place I invested all of myself in. I think it's really important to believe in what you do. I can look around and say that this place is because of me. This is my place and I love it.

So many people say that this place has changed and there's no way it can't change. We started having community meetings in a small room in a small house. Now we have a community meeting and it's in a big hall, and I love the change. I love what happens here. I don't want it to be any other way.

Dorit Shippin

Resident of the village for 36 years



I was born in 1958 in Givatayim, near Tel Aviv. My parents came to Israel (mandatory Palestine) in the 1930s, when they were children. My father was from Germany and my mother came from Poland. I am an only child. I grew up very homogeneously, in one place and with no great challenges. When I was 18, I was drafted into the army. I joined the Nachal unit, which focused on establishing new Kibbutzim. The community aspect and living in natural surroundings really appealed to me. I stayed in Kibbutzim in northern and southern Israel during my service. After the army, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I went to learn yoga.

I started practicing yoga when I was in high school. I suffered from chronic backache so many athletic activities weren't good for me. I tried Hatha Yoga and it really helped. I still really enjoy yoga because it enables me to focus on my internal self, on relaxation and personal quiet. I took a course to become a yoga teacher, not because I wanted to be a teacher, but because I wanted to deepen my knowledge and understanding of the practice. It was a month-long residential course. The yoga organization with which I had studied had centers around the world, so afterwards I decided to travel and spend time at some of their centers. At the time this was considered quite an unusual choice. I went to England, France and Canada. Then, when I returned to Israel, I worked at a yoga center in Tel Aviv and this is where I met my husband.



My husband and I wanted to open a yoga center and decided to do so in Haifa. At that time there wasn't one in the city. After the birth of our first child, we decided to move from Haifa and began to think about where we would like to raise a family. We knew we wanted to be part of a community. We looked everywhere for a place that would suit us. In the early 1980s, we came to visit Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam. It didn't look much like a village. There were a

few temporary homes and lots of greenery. It really was very beautiful but it appeared that there was no place for us. Then, a few months after our first visit, we received a phone call from the community inviting us to join! We were so happy! We loved the idea of people living together from different backgrounds and we loved the concept of peace education, which fitted with our world view and teachings from yoga. We believe in finding unity in diversity.

Our approach to living here was a little naive because I grew up without knowing Arabs and with no concept of the conflict. Arabs weren't even spoken about where I was from. I remember the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War but even with those experiences I still wasn't exposed to the conflict and the Arab perspective. In the community here I met the reality, not just the idea of Jews and Arabs living together.

After moving to the village I had two more children. All three of them were educated in the bilingual binational primary school here. All my political education on the conflict and my commitment to peace activism came from living here. Slowly I started to understand the conflict. It was hard for me to deal with and to find my place within it.

I attended the first meeting of the School for Peace in which Palestinians from the Occupied Territories were invited to meet Israelis. This was after the first Intifada and the Oslo Accords. Living in Neve Shalom Wahat al -Salam had made me much more aware of the Occupation and I wanted to be a part of a movement that worked towards ending it. I joined Women in Black. I felt that I could not have any personal feelings of peace without also dealing with the conflict and being involved in creating change.

For many years I worked in various roles in the village and while working I also focused my efforts on establishing the Spiritual Center. Its opening enabled me to connect my political activism with spirituality. The Center provides a space for creating peace through respectful learning, deepening the understanding of the other, and sharing each other's suffering. We need to recognize the pain of both peoples. We don't speak much about the Nakba in Israeli society. The Spiritual Center gives a space for this narrative which has to be part of the healing process. I ran the Spiritual Center for 10 years.

Today, I'm less politically active than in the past. After my time at the Spiritual Center I decided to focus on teaching yoga, mindfulness and meditation. I am glad to be living here in this community. It's interesting. You learn all the time.

Over the years I have understood that Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam is about more than just the people who are here. Its message is universal and very real. We make mistakes like everyone, but we create a reality that shows it is possible to live together, however difficult that might seem. This has an enormous value. It's not just talk, it's what we do.

To learn more about the community
and educational institutions of
Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom

Please visit the website

<https://wasns.org/>

