

The Big Heart Foundation and HOME Storytellers Documentary Film Project

The Dossier

Introduction

This year, The Big Heart Foundation (TBHF) will seek to collaborate with relevant partners in the MENA region to create a year-long Post-COVID Programme investing in impactful humanitarian development work across 4 main sectors: Education, Livelihoods, Healthcare and Refugee Protection. Evidence and research-based findings from the Programme will be utilized to develop fundraising, awareness, and advocacy campaigns and will further be used to guide the grantmaking for all post-COVID interventions.

As part of the program, TBHF is interested in creating a documentary which will both raise awareness on some of the challenges COVID-19 has brought to the region and highlight a selected partners' humanitarian solution that is bringing positive impact to the community during COVID-19 and beyond. TBHF will be investing in to make the impact of this solution bigger using the film for advocacy, visibility, and fundraising purposes.

The Big Heart Foundation, HOME Storytellers, and We Love Reading have partnered to create a film that highlights how reading aloud to children in their native language for

fun is enhancing psycho-social well-being, providing education and creating change-makers in refugee communities.

Selected Partner

The documentary will highlight the humanitarian development work, philosophy and impact of We Love Reading (WLR), a Jordanian nonprofit organization that fosters the love of reading for pleasure among children. Their initiative trains local men, women, and youth to hold regular read-aloud sessions for children in public spaces in their neighborhoods. WLR strives to improve the cultural, social, psychological, and educational wellbeing of children, youth, and women.



“When you have the motivation you will find the knowledge and experience along the way.”

— Rana Dajani,
Founder of WLR



This photo is a reference and was not provided by HOME Storytellers

Why it is relevant

Many refugee camps struggle to provide proper education systems because of safety concerns, practicality, cost, sustainability, and lack of qualified personnel. As a result, children are not in school, sometimes for years at a time. Even in cases where there is a school, it is often unsustainable, and girls often don't participate. Moreover, there is a collective sense or mindset within the refugee community of “needing others to help you” suggesting a lack of confidence and motivation that prevents people from believing they own the power to improve their own situation. The lack of confidence and motivation can also be a result of insufficient knowledge or experience.

Furthermore, new challenges have arisen due to the current circumstances of COVID-19. The pandemic constrained the opportunities for many children to learn during the period through which educational institutions were not able to operate in person because the social distancing measures that were adopted to contain the spread of the virus.

The We Love Reading program is designed to help communities develop ownership over their circumstances by training local volunteers to become WLR Reading Ambassadors. The positive impact of this practice has been reflected on both the children being read to as well as the adults doing the reading. It is empowering people to overcome traumas, regain confidence, identity and courage, foster social responsibility and civic engagement, and create change on a community level. Such a simple, sustainable, and scalable practice, that shows people that they are capable of doing things on their own, should be fostered around the world to empower more refugees to become change-makers in their own communities.

Many reading ambassadors, which have developed leadership and entrepreneurship skill sets due to the WLR program, continue to be change-makers despite the challenging landscape of COVID-19. They are finding creative and innovative ways to carry on with the reading aloud education projects in their communities.

Key Message

Reading creates a healthy, vibrant society by empowering people to think critically and lead the change they seek in their communities.

Premise

Everyone has potential to make change happen.

It is never too late to pursue education no matter the struggles or restrictions.

Highlights

Please note that WLR will not be explicitly described in the documentary until the end epilogue, where we will mention We Love Reading's work and The Big Heart Foundation's intervention. However, throughout the entire film WLR philosophy, methodology, and impact will be reflected through the selected personal story. The highlights include:

- Navigating in a COVID-19 setting
- Reading aloud to create changemakers
- Reading aloud to change mindsets
- When you have motivation, you will find knowledge and experience along the way
- Reading helps people discover themselves along the way
- It starts by reading but ends of solving a lot of problems
- Reading makes learning fun
- Fostering reading for pleasure
- Parent child engagement
- Youth reading to children for fun
- WLR is about creating purpose for all

The Story

Asma is a 28 year-old Syrian woman and mother of four living in the Zaatari refugee camp.

She was forced to flee her home country due to the Syrian war and arrived in Jordan in 2012 after experiencing a long and difficult journey from Syria.

Asma, her husband and their two kids arrived at Zaatari where living conditions were inhumane. There was no clean water or electricity and back then people still lived in tents so they decided to leave. They moved throughout 3 different urban areas but Asma experienced a lot of harassment from the neighbors and life was too expensive so they ended up moving back to the camp. Coming back to Zaatari was a family decision because as someone fleeing from war, they were grateful to have somewhere to sleep without hearing bombs and in safety. The sense of security had more weight than living in hard circumstances... “even that was better than living in war” says Asma.

After one year in the camp, Asma started thinking that the community needed to work together to change things. She saw potential in the camp and thought there was something to be done. She describes this moment as the time where she started feeling like “the real Asma” again. That was the exact moment when she discovered she was pregnant.

Back in Syria, the life of a woman is to get married and have children. Growing up, Asma was very excited about going to school and loved learning but she could not finish school because she was married at the age of 16. Asma always felt that there was more to life and grew up questioning what her role would be and what her potential was.

Ironically, Asma’s husband turned out to be her number one supporter and the person that most encourages her to continue pursuing her education and dreams prompting her to be socially active.

Even though camp living conditions were improving, they were receiving news about the war nonstop and hearing it made her extremely anxious. This constant anxiety was not suitable for a pregnant woman and she ended up losing the baby. She bled night and day for 3 days. Hospitals were not equipped at the camp to treat her and she saw death in the corner of her eyes. Luckily, she was taken to a hospital in Jordan where she received treatment and was cured.

Asma describes this dreadful experience as the moment where God helped her through her misery to gather the strength and do something for others. She suddenly heard about WLR and decided to take the training. Her insecurity and lack of confidence of not having a degree challenged her but when she realized all she had to do was read she felt it was her calling.

When Asma was introduced to WLR, she looked up to Rana Dajani, the founder of WLR as her role model because she came up with such a simple idea that through reading you can change lives. “I want to become that person who reads aloud to children.” she thought. Asma always loved reading and she always loved stories.

Since then, Asma began to host her own reading aloud circles in her neighborhood within her caravan. She faced many challenges when gathering the children such as convincing both the parents and the children of the importance of reading for fun. She had to fight against the mindset of children attending reading sessions instead of working to support their families.

She had to convince children that were asking for something free in return that they would be benefitting from reading in many ways. She thought of creative ways to engage children and began writing her own books with the children who attended her sessions as the protagonists of her stories. Suddenly parents began coming to her because their children were asking to be read to. Her sessions went from 5-6 children to one session where 100 children attended.

At school, her own children's teachers began to notice a significant change. They were speaking differently compared to their classmates, using a broader and more difficult vocabulary. The teachers went to find Asma to understand what she was doing and ended up hiring her as a teacher at one of the Save the Children's schools. So there she was, a woman with no degree, now a teacher at a school!

In the first reading sessions, she always handed the children blank pieces of paper to draw on and noticed that they would draw bombs, drones, and war-related elements. After weeks of reading sessions, their drawings would start to change. They started drawing family, flowers, and the things that they saw in the stories.

Asma identified the main problems in the camp such as littering and water problems and she would write stories about them to change children's attitudes and behaviours around such issues. Day by day and story by story, people began to change. Asma has been a reading ambassador for 6 years now and says that her life began again the day she became a reading ambassador.

When the pandemic hit, Asma's teaching job at Save the Children sadly terminated. However, Asma's spirit of initiative went up another notch feeling responsible for her community taking the next step of social entrepreneurship. Asma went beyond and started a campaign to gather funds to support initiatives during COVID-19. She continues to host reading sessions even though they have significantly been reduced.

Today, Asma envisions a new project. She has already begun to actively engage in making it a reality. Her mission is to empower teenage girls (ages 11-15) to have self-confidence, gain ownership of their lives, know that they have potential to create change in their community and help them understand that education, profession and social civil engagement can be part of their future no matter any challenges they may face. She will do this through a reading aloud program.

"I could not pursue my education because I was married at 16. I want girls to have the same experience as I do where life doesn't end with marriage and you can have support from your husband. You can do a lot more and you must not settle for ignorance. I want their vision of life to be widened and to inspire them to build a different future."

Asma's dream is to buy a caravan which she envisions making into a library to host the program. Hosting the programs in her house has become challenging due to lack of space and parents concerned with their children entering a private home. In a COVID-19 landscape, everything is more difficult and Asma is having a hard time getting the permissions to buy the caravan while simultaneously, attempting to raise the money to buy it. Regardless of her being able to buy a caravan or not, Asma will pursue her project even if that means once again using her own home. Gathering the girls will be the next difficult step. Asma knows that she will have to convince many families and sometimes even the teenage girls to attend. However she is willing to do so because she is certain that once they see a positive change in their lives they will be more supportive.

Asma has already done a very similar program in the past so she has experience and understands what needs to be done to see positive impact in teenage girls helping them develop communication skills, confidence and building their capacity to become stronger women.

Main Subject - A Story

Asma



28 year-old female
Mother of 4 children
Extremely charismatic and very clever
Tremendous drive



Supporter character - A Story

Fadi

Asma's husband is the character in the story who listens, supports and prompts Asma to continue with her actions.



"I noticed the We Love Reading impact on all of my family. Asma became more lively and my daughter Tamara mastered reading & writing with good vocabulary at her second grade!"

— Fadi, Asma's husband

Secondary Character - B Story

Teenage Girl

To be determined
when in Jordan

Synopsis

Asma, a 28 year-old Syrian woman, married at age 16 and destined to be a wife and mother, was not able to pursue her education in order to focus on her family. Years later, war-stricken Syria forces her and her family to flee to Jordan as refugees. Depressed, with no sense of identity or purpose and after experiencing the loss of an unborn child, she finds her calling through a reading aloud training program becoming an educator, activist and changemaker in her community at the Zaatari camp. Despite the complicated landscape of COVID-19, Asma sets out to begin an ambitious new reading aloud project to empower teenage refugee girls (ages 11-15). Knowing that she will face many challenges along the way, her own story becomes a powerful drive to help these girls build self-confidence and widen their vision of a future in which they can become strong women and owners of their lives.

Artistic References



Aesthetics



Camera Movement

Mix of steady cam and handheld cam



Narration

Mix between interview and subject's interaction with other characters

Asma's goals and vision for her new project focused on teenage girls

1- My first goal is to listen and understand this age group's problems because it is very important to hear their voice, and I notice that this age group has more problems with their parents than others specially the girls. My idea is to bring awareness and guide their ideas towards the right path as much as I can.

2- My goal is to encourage reading. To be a reader is very important and the even more important is what you read.

3- I have seen a lot of programs in the refugee camp, but reading is something new and unfortunately no one cares, but I am going to stick to it because it is unique and I hope that I have a future in this project and I will change a lot of girls' life for better.

4- This will be helpful for the society that I live in and will enhance our way of thinking that may be wrong or may lead us to a wrong place. This is the place where we live and where our children live.

5- I want the girls to grow up in a right way, to be educated, aware, able to raise the new generation, live their life without needing anyone, without deprivation, and be a change-maker even if it's a small thing.

6- I want to make the life that we deserve from the situation that we live because they need to understand that they will live only once and we should take advantage of our days in something good.

7- I want them to realize that marriage isn't the end of our life and neither is the war. God has saved us from the shelling to live and to make the children of the dead live a good life.

8- I want to recycle our thoughts and redirected them towards the right path.

9- We have a mindset that we won't ever live a good life unless we get back to our home, but life continues and won't wait for the war to stop. We were dismissed from our homes there is a power stronger than us, if we kept lost between the destroyed homes and camps, we can't lose our generations while we waiting. God has created all this world and said if you were oppressed just change your place, the earth is so wide.

10- We are living in an open world where everything is revealed. It's important for this age group girls to be aware of the world around them. I noticed that we use the technology in a way that will destroy the generation instead of using it to our benefits. At the end of the day we are living in a camp it's so easy to spread out any bad thing , so why we don't just work on ourselves and try to spread the good things only.

11- Our situation is good despite the asylum situation and life challenges. In comparison to other camps, we at Al Za'tari camp are living a better situation than other camps, so we need to take advantage of any opportunity that may come our way no matter what it is.

12- Work on raising a conscious generation. We should work on making sure the new generation become readers, having their own hobbies and making time for them.

Creative Concept and Deliverables

The story will be split into two parts of 10-20 minutes each.

Doc 1 - Part I

Part I will follow Asma as she sets out on her ambitious journey to empower teenage girls (age 11-15) in Zaatari Camp through a reading aloud approach. The entire film jumps back and forth between Asma's present and her past or backstory, helping the audience understand how her own story, already positively impacted and transformed by WLR, is the driving force of her present actions.

A clear distinction will be made between her past and her present. She will narrate her backstory by reading aloud to her own children (and even the girls in her project) the book she will write of her own backstory. Interview will be used to deepen certain themes we want to further highlight in the documentary.

Her present will be narrated through real-live conversations and actions. Her husband plays an important role in her story as her supporter, mentor and promoter who ironically is the reason why Asma could not continue her own education. He will contribute to the narration of the story from time to time.

In Part I, the secondary character (selected teenage girl) will be introduced. Her story will be revealed in depth in Part II.

Doc 2 - Part II

Part II is a continuation of Asma's pursuit to empower teenage girls after overcoming the challenges seen in the first film. In this part, the positive transformational journey of Asma's work will be reflected through both her beneficiaries and herself. Depending on how the story unfolds, Part II will either:

a) Follow the story of one of the teenage girls attending Asma's project who has her own set of challenges and desires. The audience will understand her life, context and mindset before the project and accompany her on what is soon to be a life-altering transformation. The story will be told mainly through the selected girl's voice. Secondary characters like Asma and the girl's family will support the narration of her story.

b) Continue to be narrated through Asma's voice and experience as the project progresses demonstrating the transformational power it is having in the lives of the teenage girls. From time to time we will hear some of the girl's experiences.

IMPORTANT

When filming documentary, it is very difficult to have control over how the story develops and unfolds. Therefore, it is very important to be open to any possible changes in storyplot and structure.

Asma's book

For the production of the film, we will ask Asma to write her backstory in a children's book format that she will read throughout the documentaries to her own kids and maybe even to the teenage girls of her new project.

The outline of the book will be the following:

- Asma leaves Syria because of war
- Asma arrives in Jordan feeling lost, insecure and powerless.
- Asma loses baby. The moment where she decides to find something to help bring positive change.
- Asma finds out about WLR and takes training despite her insecurities of not having an education degree.
- Asma begins reading projects in Zaatari. She makes huge change in community. (Asma tackles littering, changes children's mindsets and behaviours, writes her own stories, and becomes a teacher at Save the Children)
- COVID-19 starts.
- Asma loses job as a teacher.
- Asma begins new project to empower teenage girls during COVID-19 despite how difficult it will be.

TBHF involvement

We will film the documentaries using Asma's draft book (as there is not enough time to produce it beforehand).

After the production, TBHF will financially support WLR in the development and production of Asma's book.

The book will be released alongside the documentary Part II during TBHF's November event. After the event, the book will be distributed to reading ambassadors around the world so that they can use Asma's book to inspire and educate new generations to become change-makers and lead positive impact!

Logline



Doc1

A 28 year-old Syrian mother of four, not able to pursue her own education as a child, found her calling as an educator-activist after becoming a refugee in Jordan and sets out to start an ambitious reading aloud project to empower teenage refugee girls despite the challenging landscape COVID-19.



Doc2

A Syrian teenage refugee girl struggling with her difficult life circumstance that has worsened due to COVID-19, discovers Asma's reading aloud empowerment project and decides to attend despite not having her family's full support.

NOTE - Logline most likely will vary depending on how the story unfolds and the selected teenage girls personal story.

This photo is a reference and was not provided by HOME Storytellers

This is a first proposal. Please consider that logline could possibly evolve depending on how the story evolves.

Directors Statement

I never imagined I would be filming the story of a woman my age. It is very interesting for me to see the different lives we were born into and even though they differ greatly we are still two women trying to make a difference in the world through storytelling. The parallelisms are fascinating. To see how Asma has been able to take control of her life in difficult life circumstances is truly inspiring and admirable. I am awed by her capacity and creativity to take the knowledge given by the We Love Reading training and apply it to tackle other problems the refugee community is facing. In the beginning I wondered where she got the drive to be so actively involved and I am slowly starting to understand that her own story is her driving force to make change happen.

As Asma begins her ambitious new storytelling project so will we, aspiring to create a documentary film that accurately conveys Asma's social entrepreneur spirit and her journey to use the power of reading aloud to empower and create impact in the lives of teenage girls from conservative households living through what she one day went through. Through intimate reading aloud sessions, she aims to provide girls with a safe, intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging space where they can have a voice, feel support and guidance to their problems, receive education and awareness, develop agency and ownership and make friends.

Unlike the stories seen on the news of refugees in life or death situations, Asma's story takes the refugee narrative one step further as a refugee on a pursuit to achieve self-fulfillment and esteem. Her story brings to light the importance of refugees having agency, a voice and ownership of their circumstance to bring the change they seek to see in their community.

We hope that sharing Asma's story can confront people and remove stigmas from society.

We hope it can also inspire people around the world to understand the importance of reading aloud for pleasure and to become witnesses of how one simple practice like reading aloud to children fostered by WLR can solve so many other problems.

— Alejandra Alcalá

Production Film Crew



Mexican Executive
Producer, Second
Camera &
Photographer

Francisco Alcala



Mexican
Director & Editor

Alejandra Alcala



Jordanian Director
of Photography

To be confirmed once contract with
TBHF is signed.

Omar Sawalha

Production Film Crew



Jordanian Sound
Recordist

To be confirmed once contract with
TBHF is signed.

Tarek Abu Ghoush



American
Photographer

Patti Bartelstein



Jordanian Fixer &
We Love Reading
Staff Member

Ghufraan Abudayyeh

Impact Vision

To highlight how reading aloud to children in their native language for fun is enhancing psycho-social well-being, providing education and creating change-makers in refugee communities.

TBHF Goals

To be defined. We still need to clarify impact goals with The Big Heart Foundation.

Will TBHF goals be the same to WLR reading goals or will they differ?

WLR Goals

- Spread WLR education to new countries
- New partner organizations
- More reading ambassadors

(If the film can be subtitled in the main languages it can help reach the impact goals.)



Timeline

| PHASE | START DATE | END DATE | DELIVERY |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| Development + Pre-production Phase | Mid October 2020 | March 23 2021 | |
| One Production Trip (20 days) | March 21, 2021 | April 11, 2021 | |
| Post-Production (Doc 1) | Late April, 2021 | Early August, 2021 | Early August, 2021 |
| Post-Production (Doc 2) | Early August 2021 | Early November 2021 | Early November 2021 |
| Film Website | January 2021 | Mid November 2021 | June - with photo content + teaser |
| Impact Campaign Tools | January 2021 | Mid November 2021 | |
| Distribution Film Festivals | Mid August 2021 | December 2021 | |
| Teaser | Late April, 2021 | Mid June | Mid June |