

# The Gaza I Live

Most Americans think of Gaza as a place of suffering and militancy, but the reality is that Gaza is home to some of the most inspiring and creative people in the Middle East. For the past two years, as the area's representative for Catholic Relief Services, I've traveled there as much as I can. I see what the front-page newspaper photos don't show you: this tiny sliver of land on the Mediterranean is a place of energy and dynamism, of humor and warmth and unbelievable hospitality, of delicious fish and crabs and the romantic fragrance of apple tobacco.

But these days, heartbreakingly, it is a place of fear and pain. In mid-January, Gazans took matters into their own hands and tore down the wall separating them from Egypt. After a few days of freedom, the borders were closed and they returned to life on a strip of land usually cut off from supplies and short on opportunity; 40-50 percent of Gazans are unemployed and 80 percent of the population relies on humanitarian aid. In March, after Gazan militants fired homemade rockets on Israel, Israeli airstrikes killed over a hundred people in Gaza.

These realities are grim, and solutions to the conflict are hard to come by. Yet as I watch the news, I wish others could experience the Gaza that I do. On the wall in my place in Jerusalem, I've hung a beautiful still life of a Gazan cafe table, replete with brilliant reds and pinks and yellows, painted by a Gazan artist named Raed Issa. I imagine Raed sitting in his studio in Gaza wishing he could buy paints, which may not be available due to the border closures that started in June 2007. Or maybe he's in Egypt, looking for that special yellow hue that made my painting so vivid and so real and so full of Gaza's beauty. I hope he finds it and makes it home safely.

I think always of the stories of the great Palestinian filmmaker Rashid Masharawi, who I met last year. We had dinner at a friend's house and he entertained all of us with nonstop stories about growing up in the Beach refugee camp in Gaza. I laughed so hard I cried as he told stories of family life—the love of family for each other that makes me recall my own childhood in New Jersey with such fondness. Like the time when, shortly after the 16-year-old Rashid had taken to smoking the occasional clandestine cigarette, he and his father were stopped on their way home from the market by a group of Israeli soldiers. Hands against the wall, Rashid's greatest fear

was that the soldiers would pat him down and discover the single cigarette in the Marlboro box stuffed down his sock—and they did. Looking out of the corner of his eye, his father’s only comment was: “Smoking! And an expensive foreign brand! Wait till I get you home.” That’s the humor and the humanity of the Gaza I know.

In early January, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick insisted on going to Gaza on the very day that President George Bush was visiting President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. The situation is always a bit tense when such visits happen, but the Cardinal wanted to go and check in with a local Gaza parish and the projects CRS runs with young people, Christian and Muslim. We met with 20 young people, university students of both sexes, and their message was sad despite their smiles and their thankfulness for our visit. “We have very little hope for change right now,” said one young man. “All I really have hope for today is that I’ll have electricity when I go home from our meeting, so my mother can have light to cook by and we will have heat at night.” Young people need the capacity to hope for so much more.

A week after the March airstrikes, I had another chance to connect with young people in Gaza because CRS has recently begun another youth initiative there. The college-age Gazans described their options as being increasingly limited. Mostly, they’re limited to volunteer work with organizations like CRS, or military activity. Often, in fact, the latter isn’t paid either—though it does provide steady work, if little future. These young people have known death too intimately; it seeps through their words and thoughts.

What struck me were the words of two of the students – a young woman named Amani from Beit Hanoun (where the homemade rockets are launched and the Israeli missiles strike in response), and a young man named Sari. Amani said that the most pressing need in Gaza was openness: the opportunity to have a broad discussion about their society, to challenge ideas and question everything. Sari said that Gaza’s youth need to draw from the strength and health of their community, without being corrupted by politics. Right now, they said, it is too hard for young people to engage each other and the society around them to build their lives and act in the world. Like Raed Issa and Rashid Masharawi and so many of the other people that make Gaza Gaza, these young people want to be creators. I am proud CRS can help them get a bit closer to that dream and I pray that they will make it.

Tom Garofalo is Country Representative for Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza at Catholic Relief Services.