



COURTESY



**Name:** Julie Benbenishty

**ID:** Today, at age 60, Julie is coordinator of Hadassah Hospital's Trauma Unit and the founder, with Hadassah nurse Na'ila Hayek, of the outreach organization Nurses in the Middle East

*How did you adjust to Israeli high school when you insisted on moving to Israel as a teen?*

High school was much harder in Israel than in the United States. I don't know what people are talking about when they complain about Israeli education. Completing the end-of-high school matriculation exams was the hardest thing I've ever done.

*Describe your Israeli nursing career.*

I was accepted at the Henrietta Szold Hadassah-Hebrew University School of Nursing in Jerusalem, and received my Bachelors in Nursing there. I then served as an army nurse in the IDF. For most of my career I worked in the Intensive Care Unit, but eight years ago I switched to Trauma. I coordinate the nursing care of trauma events, be they car accidents, falls from buildings or terror attacks.

*How did you happen to start the NGO Nurses in the Middle East?*

About thirty percent of our patients come from the West Bank and Gaza. They are transferred to Hadassah because they have serious ailments that can't be treated there. But the minute they returned, I had no one to be in touch with about follow-up care. I wanted to speak to the nurses there, both in the hospitals and communities.

One case in particular spurred me to action. At Hadassah Hospital, I'd been caring for a severely injured Palestinian truck driver for three months. He had a crushed pelvis, abdominal hemorrhage, and his left foot was amputated.

He was ready to go home, and needed rehabilitation closer to his home in Hebron. My fellow nurses and I wanted to make sure that his still healing injuries received proper care. I wanted to speak to the Palestinian nurse who would be treating him. Despite outreach through doctors and NGOs, I still couldn't find a nurse to whom to transmit the patient's information. I felt awful that despite the relatively short distance of under 20 miles I didn't know one nurse there.

I talked this over with my close friend and colleague Na'ila Hayek, who is an Arab-Israeli nurse from the Galilee. She's now in charge of all the Hadassah Intensive Care Units. She had the same problem when her patients went home. We began asking around and getting names of nurses in the Palestinian Authority. Na'ila phoned them and half a dozen of us met for coffee. That was the beginning.

We began building ties by coordinating nursing care. The word began spreading. Nurses of the Middle East was born. We describe ourselves as being a West/East Jerusalem NGO, and our board is made up of nurses from both sides of the city. We have also received sponsorship from Jean Watson, an American nurse best known for her Theory of Human Caring. She's the founder of the Watson Caring Institute in Boulder, Colorado. We have had private contributions and help from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

*Why do you now hold your annual conferences in Jordan?*

There's no problem for Israeli Jews and Ar-

abs, nor for Palestinian Christians and Moslems to go to Jordan. We have nurses coming to our conference from Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and the US.

*How do you speak to each other?*

Even though the majority of the participants speak Arabic as a mother tongue, the Iranian nurses speak Farsi, the Israelis Hebrew, so the professional sessions are held in English. In the mingling, an important part of the conference, people adjust their language to the conversation.

*What do you speak about?*

Our goal is to promote regional health and connect nurses to each other, regardless of political, ethnic, or religious identity. Nurses are the hands-on care givers, and nursing is at the center of our conversations. We are successful in building lines of communications and launch joint projects. For example, we have done joint research on childhood injuries and nurse burnout. We have developed protocols for treating mass casualties. As Middle Eastern nurses we are all dealing with traditional societies and have many of the same challenges. As nurses we have a lot in common.

*What were the new topics at your latest conference in February?*

In one word: refugees. Many of our nurses have been involved in treating refugee populations. Some of the nurses consider themselves refugees, too, and we talked about that. Are you only a refugee when you are forced to leave your home, or when your parents or grandparents had to leave? We started in 2011 with a handful of nurses, and this year we had 140 participants from all over the Middle East, with hundreds more who couldn't come to the conference getting regular updates on our work.

*You volunteer for Nurses in the Middle East even though you have such a challenging job. Why?*

I don't define being a nurse as just doing my shift. Being a nurse means worrying about healing in the broader sense and making a better world for my children and yours. ■

*Barbara Sofer is the Israel director of Public Relations for Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. Her latest book is 'The Daughter of Many Mothers' with Holocaust survivor Rena Quint*