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#FEMALEFORWARD

Najat
Saliba

—
*Environmental
Conservationist*

The WOMAN of LIBYAN

~~HOW?~~

~~WHY?~~

~~WHO?~~

~~WHAT?~~

~~WHEN?~~

WOMEN

Empowering women and closing gender gaps in the world are key for economies and communities to thrive. Therefore, the aim of our series "Women of Lebanon" is to give women from very different backgrounds in the country a voice, as we believe that it is important to portray strong women and use their impact to inspire future generations. Thus, this series will cover a whole range of different topics and sectors, from human rights, the arts to business and politics and all the women in the series have one thing in common: they are outstanding personalities who believe in change and the importance of individual responsibility to work for a better society. I am particularly grateful to Nicole Hamouche, the author of this series, who has identified and interviewed the ten women in our series and has worked so hard to make this project happen.

Enjoy reading and we hope that you will get inspired too!

Best regards,



Kristof Kleemann

*Project Director
ENF Lebanon and Syria*

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Dr. Najat A. Saliba is a Full Professor at the Chemistry Department, FAS, and the Director of the AUB-Nature Conservation Center at AUB. Dr. Saliba established international protocols for the chemical studies of Water Pipe (WP), and provided policy makers worldwide with scientific evidence to support the ban on indoor WP smoking. She also developed innovative methods to determine the chemical characteristics of electronic cigarettes and initiated major projects to assess air pollutants in Lebanon. She has over 60 peer-reviewed articles that are highly cited. She is the recipient of the Lebanese National Council for Scientific Research Award in the Environmental Category in 2016.

**Najat
Saliba**

@Najat_Saliba

<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=aTR-wCkAAAAJ&hl=en>

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE



NAJAT SALIBA

Outspoken advocate of environmental preservation
and the dignity that goes with it

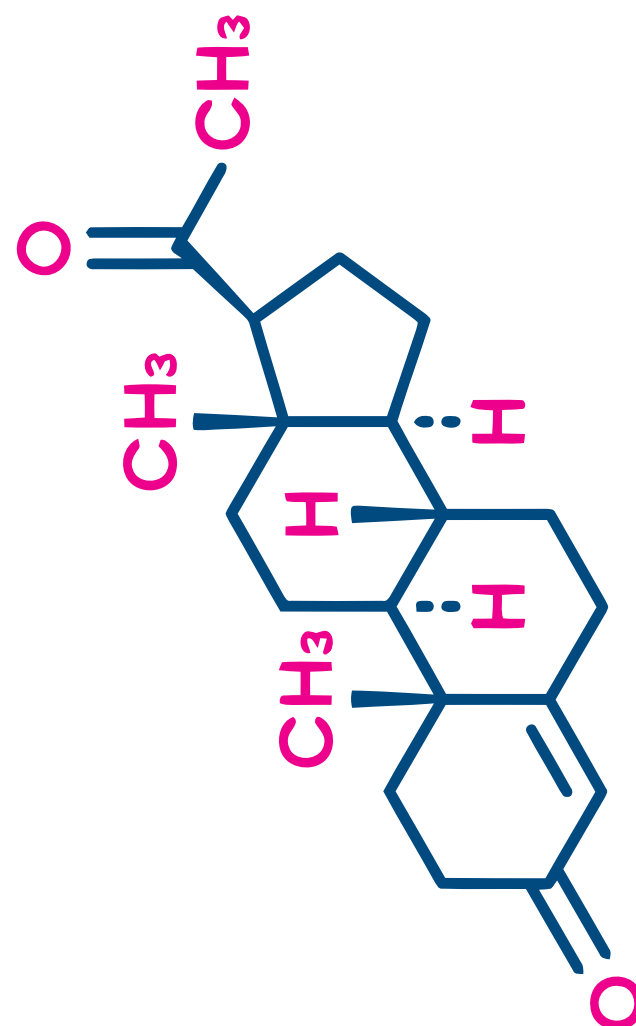
by

NICOLE HAMOUCHE

She says that she likes to be called “the daughter of the earth” rather than a researcher or a scientist, this is how she introduces herself in a short film about her broadcasted on Sky News. “The daughter of the earth” was awarded the very prestigious UNESCO – L’Oreal prize for Women in Science in 2019 after which she received the National Order of the Cedar from the President of the Lebanese Republic. In the same year, Najat Aoun Saliba was also voted amongst BBC’s top 100 inspiring and influential women from around the world. Professor at AUB in the chemistry department and director of the AUB Nature Conservation Center, she is the beacon of depollution and nature preservation in the country. Many Lebanese, aside from experts and scholars, discovered her on the eve of the blast of August 4 as she was one of the guests of the popular talk show “Sar el Waet” ie “It is time”. “We have problems and we have to solve them as soon as possible. We have laws that we need to apply in order to solve these problems. We have the knowledge, let’s just apply it”. Najat Saliba is outspoken and clear: “Education gives self-esteem, science gives critical thinking and then one needs to speak out”.

“Make your own destiny, build it incrementally with passion, knowledge and science” were her concise words at the L’Oreal-UNESCO ceremony. Her passion is especially inspirational to women, whose cause is dear to her. The acclaimed scientist invites them to stand up for their rights and fight for what they believe in. A path she herself has walked, from the banana plantations in Damour and the traditional environment where she grew up, to the den of science and more precisely atmospheric chemistry in the US. “Women have the power to move mountains, because we are inclusive, women can see the bigger picture. Nature is she” observes this restless advocate of depollution and a dignified

way of living, who repeatedly expresses her “rage” since the August 4th blast. A few days after the blast, together with some of her colleagues, she didn’t hesitate to launch “Khaddit Beirut”, an initiative meant to address the deep gaps in society. If Najat Saliba says she “wants every woman to become a fighter”, she is surely one of those.



Put a relevant caption here



Tell us about your journey, from Damour to the US and to atmospheric chemistry

I grew up in Damour, my father was a banana farmer. Thus, the love of nature grew within me when I was a kid. It was engraved in me, we were all called to work the land: picking olives, helping our in breeding. We spent a lot of time watching the sea and the clouds to predict if it was going to rain or not. Now people look up the weather somewhere on the internet. My mother, on her side always pushed me to pursue higher education. I studied chemistry at the Lebanese University, it took me six years to get the Bachelor of Science, because of the war and the hardship we went through after the Damour massacre. My father lost his business and we had to leave Damour. I had to stop attending university and work to help out my dad. After I graduated, I taught in schools for six years, I knew, however that I didn't want to stop there. My brother was in the US and I wanted to join him in 1989 at the time of

the inter-Christian war in Lebanon. My father, of course, didn't agree with this plan - a girl doesn't need to go to America to study. I had to have my grandfather, who was self-taught and passionate about education, intervene. Once there, it was not until I met my husband, who supported me and appreciated my ambition and passion, that I could go back to university. Since I didn't have the means to, when I first arrived there. At first, I did a masters in Water Chemistry then shifted to Physical Chemistry for my PHD and Post Doc, which I did at the University of California with Barbara Finlayson and James Pitts, one of the founders of atmospheric chemistry. With my background, degrees and connections, I could have worked anywhere in the US, however I felt like working at AUB. I applied and was chosen, this is how I went back to Lebanon in 2001.



What ignited your passion for environmental protection? Can you share with us your takes on this subject in Lebanon?

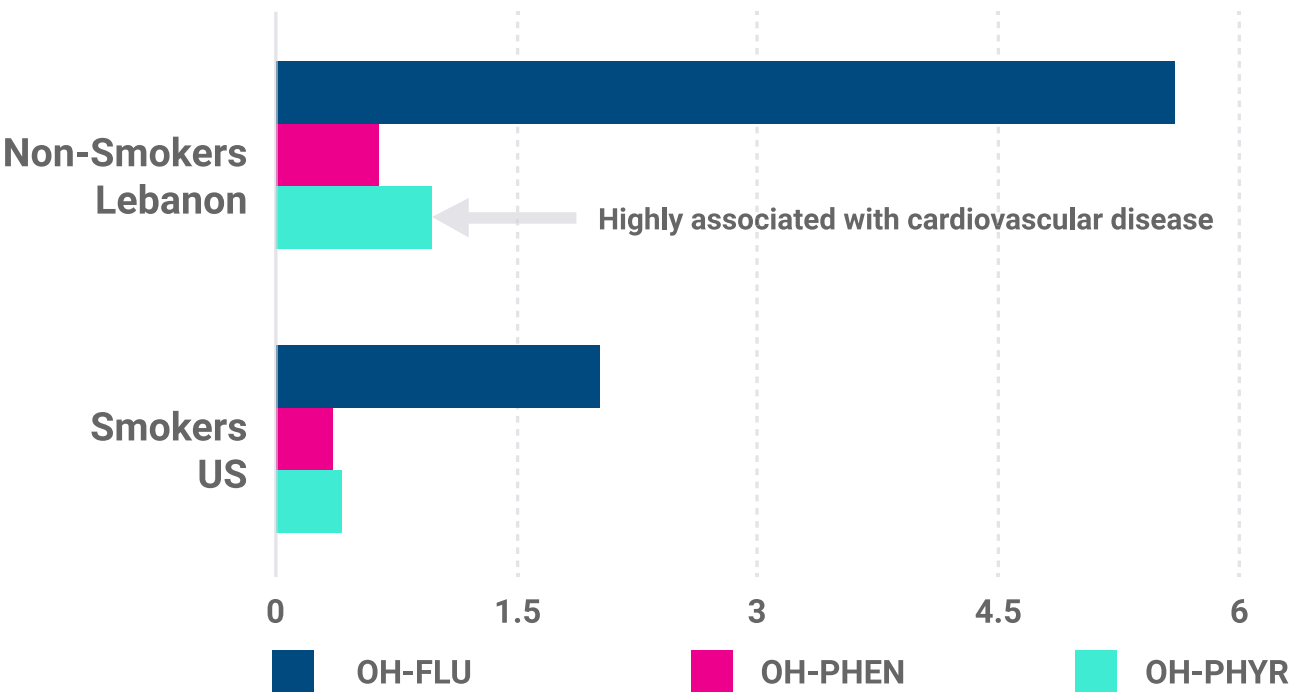
I owe my love and understanding of the environment to my father, as I said. When I am in the plane, I look at how the clouds form and at how we hurt the beauty of the sky, this took me to analytical chemistry which studies the chemical composition of atmospheric particles. My lab was the first to put air pollution in Beirut on the map. According to WHO 7 million people die from air pollution every year, 90% of which live in developing countries. Since I came back to my home country, I have researched air pollution and how to prevent it. The more I investigated pollution in Lebanon across the years, the more I saw how the environmental situation was deteriorating. The mushrooming of diesel generators amongst buildings, the maintenance of the

Zouk turbines, the imported fuel, the burning of waste, power plants, car pollution, all had highly carcinogenic emissions. It was intentional to normalize the use of generators, in order to sell fuel and gasoline, it is all about corruption. Factories are killing people in communities and politicians are aware of the dangers, yet they still allow them to go on with it as the factories belong to their followers.

Since then, I feel we are living The Plague of Camus.

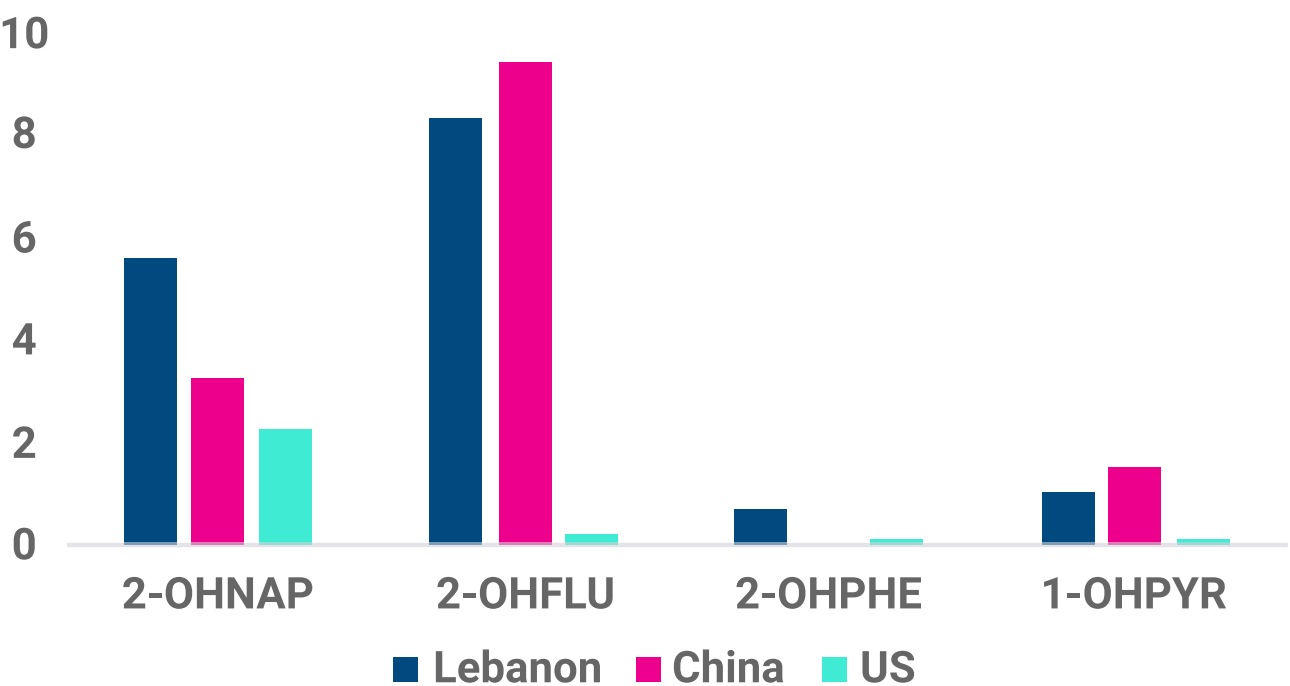
Combustion urine markers are high in non-smokers in Lebanon

Saliba and coworkers, 2020



Combustion markers in urine samples

Saliba and coworkers, 2020



I didn't spare any time to draw the attention on the hazards, gave presentations everywhere, wrote about it in newspapers.

University professors are not meant to be advocates, I chose to be an advocate. I have fought fiercely against incinerators, worked with the Ministry of Environment for a long time and shared information with them, it has gotten us nowhere. In other countries laws are drafted in collaboration with researchers and scientists. In Lebanon, we offer our work and they don't take it.

August 4 was the culmination point, I am very angry, enraged. Negligence and corruption have been so obvious, but never did I imagine that it would reach a point where it would blow up the city. Everything was preventable: 300.000 people have been displaced, 6.000 injured, many of which are still in a coma and others now have to live with severe injuries. I cannot be more angry, more demanding of justice than I am today.

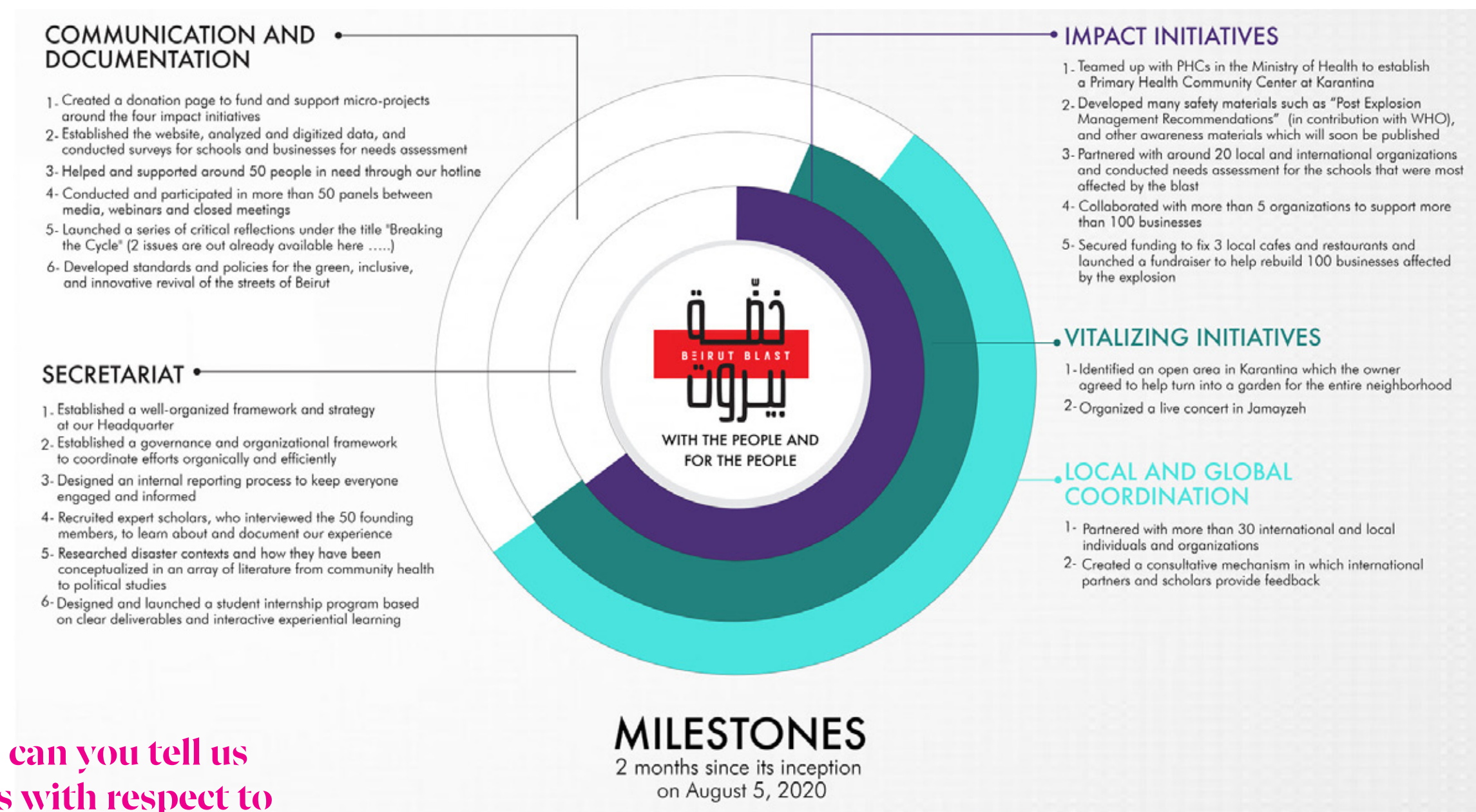
You multiplied your engagements upon Beirut's blast. Can you tell us about Khaddit Beirut?

Two days after the blast, while walking through Gemmayze with a friend, who happens to be a colleague, we thought it could not just be "thawra" anymore, we need a systematic approach. We came up with the idea of Khaddit Beirut, an initiative inspired by the sense of collective purpose. Health and education appeared to be the priorities. We drew a strategy and called on the expertise of our colleagues at AUB. Because of the economic collapse and COVID 19, primary and secondary education has gotten weaker and weaker. We chose to start by working together with the schools and graduate students on a volunteer basis. We are building a new model of education that would be ready when public authorities decide that they want to listen. We are also working on a health care model for the community. Further, immediately after the blast, Khaddit Beirut launched a fundraising campaign to help 100 businesses - mainly in Gemmayze - reopen, as the employ 1600 people. Zouk turbines, the imported fuel, the burning of waste, power plants, car pollution, all had highly carcinogenic emissions. It was intentional to normalize the use of generators, in order to sell fuel and gasoline, it is all about corruption. Factories are killing people in communities and politicians are aware of the dangers, yet they still allow them to go on with it as the factories belong to their followers.

Aside from Khaddit Beirut, can you tell us about your other endeavors with respect to public space and environment?

We created the Environment Academy with the support of the WHO (the World Health Organization), an initiative that aims at teaching the community how to take care of the environment, we launched a call for applications on TV. Ten projects were selected, assisted by ten local committees. Btebyat in Hammanah valley is an example: it encompassed a waste management plan in the village for recycling and composting instead of dumping the

waste in the river, a social contract to protect the valley was also passed on with the Municipalities' Union Director. In Ebba near Nabatiye, we launched a waste recycling program in a public school, which drew interest and support of the diaspora for other environmental projects. Another project we are working on is Nafas, transforming abandoned areas in Karantina into gardens and green spaces.



With all the pollution and harm that you see and measure, the deterioration you mention and the anger that you express, would you not consider leaving? Is this trend still reversible and do we have what it takes to address environmental issues?

I have no doubt in the education we have, I don't think we lack knowledge, education or the science. We lack the governmental will. It doesn't take rocket science to protect people from chemicals. The standards are there, with the era of information, we cannot say we don't know. I close the windows of my car when I am driving in traffic and I ventilate my house early in the morning when the air is still clear. I stay because my advocacy is so dear to me, I feel it is my life and I feel especially useful.





Learn more about the Initiative at

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