

Fida Qishta's "Where Should the Birds Fly" NYC 6/21 (1 of 1)

Fida Qishta's documentary about life in Gaza, "Where Should the Birds Fly," screened at the Manhattan Film Festival on June 21st. Qishta took the film's title from a poem written in 1983 by Mahmoud Darwish:

The Earth is closing on us, pushing us through the last passage, and we tear off our limbs to pass through....

Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after the last sky?

The film begins in Qishta's neighborhood in Rafah, the southernmost city in Gaza. The area is now only rubble. Beginning before dawn on January 21, 2004, without warning, Israeli bulldozers demolished 60 homes in six hours. Qishta, at the time a novice wedding videographer, filmed the destruction – her family and neighbors struggling to get to safety, boys throwing rocks at the D-9 bulldozers. Her mother fainted. After reviving her, Qishta's father told the family to walk away without looking back, because if they looked back, their hearts would be filled with hate. Qishta didn't have the heart to watch what she had filmed until years later, when the sight of her cousin waving a white flag in a useless appeal to stop the bulldozers allowed Qishta, for the first time, to cry.

Qishta explained in an interview that the family had to split up to find shelter, because no one could host eight people at once. It took three years of hard work by all of the family to afford a place where the family could reunite. Soon after the demolition, Qishta and her older sister Faten founded The Life-Maker's Centre, a free facility where 300 children affected by war come to be in a safe place where they can play, learn, and receive counseling. (This reporter visited The Lifemaker's Centre in 2009 and found it one of the happiest places in Gaza.)

The need for a safe place for children was made clear to Qishta by an incident that happened four years earlier, which still haunts her. She was walking home after a long day at college and decided to take the direct route to her house, even though Israeli soldiers were patrolling and some children were throwing stones. When she hesitated to cross the street, a boy asked if she were scared. She said no, in a shaky voice. The boy said, "Yes you are, but I will show you how to do it." As he darted across the street, an Israeli sniper shot him in the head. Qishta carried him to a nearby paramedic, but the boy died.

In addition to managing and teaching at The Lifemaker's Centre, Qishta carried on as a wedding videographer, happy to film people still able to dance and sing even while in a virtual prison under constant threat from air, land, and sea. In 2006 she was able to leave Gaza for a speaking tour in England and New York. Upon returning, she had to wait three weeks on the Egyptian side of the border for Israel to open the Rafah crossing. Nine people died during that time. She filmed the misery and wrote to friends in London, who forwarded it to the *London Observer*, which published her report.

When members of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) were able to return to Gaza with the Free Gaza boats in 2008, Qishta worked with them as translator and

videographer. She filmed Israeli soldiers shooting at farmers trying to work their land near the Israeli-imposed buffer zone, 1000 meters wide with 95% on the Gaza side of the border resulting in a 30% loss of Gaza's arable land. Israel bulldozed everything within the buffer zone – homes, trees, fields. On board a fishing boat, where she confessed to being more afraid of the deep water than the IDF, she filmed, with a steady hand, Israeli gunboats shooting at them not more than two miles from the shore. One fisherman says, "Going fishing is like entering a battleground." Another says, "No one in the world cares about us. No laws protect us."

Then, on December 27, 2008, Israel began its war on Gaza with F16 and drone attacks. Qishta was the first journalist on the scene in Rafah. People were terrified and screaming, but Qishta couldn't leave. She explains, "My camera is the only weapon I have against these attacks on the people of Gaza. Despite my own fear and anger, I felt safe behind the camera. I know if I'm shot, my camera will capture the bullet that kills me." With his permission because he wanted the world to know, a 15-year-old allowed Qishta to film him being treated for horrendous white phosphorous burns. His father had been cut in two, his sister burned to death. Her camera captured a child stumbling along the street past corpses. At the New York screening, an audience member suggested that showing such images is in poor taste. Qishta replied that people ought to see and know what happens at the receiving end of a military assault; they need not live it.

In the Zaitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, Qishta was introduced to 10-year-old Mona Samouni. On January 4, 2009, Israeli soldiers ordered the extended Samouni family, more than 100 people, into one building, and then bombed it, killing half of them, including Mona's parents. The survivors were trapped inside for three days with the dead, the dying, and the wounded. Mona told Qishta, without any emotion, who was killed or wounded by each of the four missiles. Each time Qishta visited Mona, she took her to the site of the missile attack and repeated what happened with more and more detail, numb and without tears. Mona said, "The soldiers killed them as though they are not people, but those they killed were precious to us. I ask the children of the world to take good care of their parents." In 2011, a friend of Qishta's visited Mona, who now wants to be a doctor. She loves birds because they have freedom. "In Gaza we are locked in a cage of sorrow." Qishta asked Mona to sing a song. She chose one by the poet Lutfi Yassini. "Where Should the Birds Fly" closes with Mona singing:

I'm the Palestinian Child
I carried the grief early,
All the world forgot me,
They closed their eyes to my oppression
I'm steadfast. I'm steadfast.

Throughout the attack, Qishta kept a diary and sent it to a friend in England. The *Observer* and *The Guardian* published almost everything she wrote, photographed, and filmed. This led to *The Guardian* selecting Qishta for training in filmmaking. She was able

to leave Gaza to travel to London in the Spring of 2009. After training, she came to New York, bringing with her all the footage she had shot in Gaza. She has spent the last two and a half years editing and fundraising to complete "Where Should the Birds Fly." Living in New York, Qishta said, has changed her heart. In spite of her father's warning when their home was demolished, Qishta described herself as a sad and angry person when she first arrived in the U.S. Living in a conflict zone, she explained, makes it difficult to keep your heart free of hate; everything keeps coming and you can barely breathe. Living here, among people who have been generous and encouraging, and learning about other people's tragedies at first confused her and made her ask, "Why do we keep hurting each other?" Now she is guided by Martin Luther King's words: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

In addition to the Manhattan Film Festival, "Where Should the Birds Fly" was an official selection at the Al Jazeera International Documentary Film Festival, the 2013 winner of the Aloha Accolade Award, and will be screened in September at the Third World Indy Festival in San Francisco. She is hoping to take the film to the next level, including making it available on DVD. In the meantime, to arrange a screening in your area, contact Qishta at Fida.qishta@gmail.com and see the website at whereshouldthebirdsfly.org.