

Northern California Chronicle: Bethlehem University Graduate From Gaza City Visits San Francisco

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Bethlehem University Graduate From Gaza City Visits San Francisco

By Elaine Pasquini



Bethlehem University graduate Berlanty Azzam (l) and Monsignor Labib Kobti. (Staff photo Phil Pasquini)

Seven months after receiving her bachelor's degree in business administration from Bethlehem University, Gaza City resident Berlanty Azzam made her first visit to San Francisco. Accompanying her was Bethlehem University vice president for development Brother Jack Curran, FSC, Ph.D., and Kate Casa, executive director of the school's development office for North America.

Speaking Aug. 8 at St. Thomas More Church, the home of Northern California's Arab-American Catholic Community helmed by Monsignor Labib Kobti, the young graduate related her struggle to complete her education at Bethlehem University, where she began her studies in 2005.

Since 2000, Israel has enforced a ban preventing Gaza students from attending universities in the West Bank. Azzam was arrested by the Israeli military following an Oct. 28, 2009 job interview in Ramallah, she said, and taken—blindfolded and handcuffed—to the Gaza border. Assisted by the Israeli NGO Gisha, whose goal is to protect freedom of movement and restore rights guaranteed to Palestinians, especially Gaza residents, by international and Israeli law, Azzam appealed to the Israeli high court for a permit to return to the Bethlehem campus. Despite the fact that she needed only two months to meet her graduation requirements, however, the court denied her request.

Frustrated and sad, Azzam was left with no choice but to complete her studies from Gaza City. Connecting with her teachers by e-mail, phone, or fax, she completed her courses and fulfilled her graduation requirements.

Even though she was unable to graduate with her classmates at her side, Azzam was thrilled when Bethlehem University officials—including the Papal Nuncio H.E. Archbishop Antonio Franco, chancellor, and the pope's highest ranking representative to Israel and Palestine; Vice Chancellor Brother Peter Bray; Vice Chancellor Emeritus Brother Joe; and Trappist Abbott Thomas—traveled to Gaza to present her with her certificate. The ceremony was held Jan. 10 at Gaza City's Holy Family Church following Mass celebrated by the Papal Nuncio.

"I'm grateful that Bethlehem University stood by me and helped me," the graduate told her San Francisco audience. "Many other students are waiting in Gaza. Please try to help these students who are trying to get to Bethlehem University."

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