

# Lunch with...

## Raghda El Ebrashi

Egyptian social entrepreneur Raghda El Ebrashi is a 25-year-old who has already spent a decade tackling poverty in her homeland. **Chrisanthi Giotis** steals her from the Skoll World Forum and whisks her to an Oxford café

It's the third day of the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship and Raghda El Ebrashi, an unassuming 25-year-old, is walking through the streets of Oxford in search of a café and laughing, often.

She is an invited speaker at the world forum. And, one of a select group of Middle Eastern social entrepreneurs who are supported by New York-based Synergos Institute as part of its Arab World Social Innovators Programme.

Given her youth you'd think she'd be backed on a wing and prayer, with those around her hoping she'll make it – the opposite is the case. She has ten years' experience. This young woman started creating Alashanek Ya Balady Association for Sustainable Development (AYB-SD) at the age of 15, the same year that she entered the prestigious American University of Cairo. Now, aged 25, she is the driving force behind three social ventures that help finance a development programme that she hopes will bring people out of poverty, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, across Egypt. More on that later – right now we're still searching for food.

We come across Café 1071 at the entrance to Oxford Castle. El Ebrashi tells me that she enjoyed the walk because, in her homeland of Egypt, women cannot walk around alone without harassment.

We both order the café's leek and potato soup. I order tea, but El Ebrashi sticks to her favourite drink – water.

During the walk I've discovered that she is a fun and intelligent companion.

Now, as we settle into the aluminium café seats, I discover she also has strength and passion.

El Ebrashi's defining moment came at the age of 12. She was on a trip to Belbis – a poor rural area in Egypt – as part of her school's outreach work. She played popular traditional songs on the lute for locals. After the performance, a woman invited the young girl to her home to meet her children. El Ebrashi went and was astounded by what she saw. With a child's innocence and brashness, she refused to sit on the floor. But as there was no furniture, the woman brought some of her own clothes to sit on. Then El Ebrashi asked why there was no air-conditioning unit, no dolls, no refrigerator.

She continues: 'After that the woman said "you forgot to mention something else we don't have" I said "what?" At her request, I looked and saw they didn't have a ceiling.'

'This woman taught me the value of life. She really changed my future. She taught me that nothing should be taken

for granted and it was just my luck that I was privileged.'

El Ebrashi's parents responded by explaining all they could about the injustices in Egypt. Then at 13, El Ebrashi started volunteering with NGOs, a path that eventually led her to this café in Oxford.

For her, being at Skoll has itself allowed her to break down stereotypes, just though being herself.

'Because I'm wearing the scarf people think I'm not educated, but I can show them I'm still inspiring and still educated,' she says.

Having been invited as part of the Arab World Social Innovators Programme, she is also able to gain valuable recognition that she doesn't receive at home. She says: 'We have a lot of Arab investors. but they don't invest in human beings, they invest in infrastructure like petroleum. In the western world you like to invest in human beings more – that's why we take our recognition from outside the Arab world.'

'We don't need recognition to be famous – I have journalists calling me every day. But recognition I want is institutional support, political support, networking, education.'

El Ebrashi chides me to eat my soup, which is going cold, but I soon find myself drawn back to my pen. She tells me that the other great advantage of the innovators programme is being introduced to people in her own country that she never knew. She is collaborating with social entrepreneurs working in the region – creating business opportunities



and sharing knowledge. And trust me, this woman, who is completing a PhD in social entrepreneurship, has a lot of knowledge to share.

Two lessons in particular stand out from our discussion. Firstly, AYB-SD started as an informal student group to improve literacy in one area of Cairo. This was franchised under the same brand to other universities. El Ebrashi made a conscious decision to start as an informal group rather than a structured NGO because she realised that the young didn't trust NGOs.

'I found my friends at university didn't know anything about Egypt's problems. Their mission, both boys and girls, was to finish university, bring children into the world and die,' she says.

'I found out that everyone involved with NGOs was old and the organisations had a lack of credibility with the youth, who saw them as very corrupt and doing nothing. So the youth were marginalised and didn't do anything with their time. This is why I thought it was the right initiative to start in universities and draw young people into development.'

Secondly, AYB-SD's three social ventures were each created to support specific development programmes by their very existence, not just through handing over profits. For example,

its consultancy firm Revive, which provides training and advice to corporations and graduates, also teaches resumé writing, leadership, communication and other skills. These are imparted as part of the capacity-building, employment and microcredit programmes run in Old Cairo. There, upmarket jewellery brand Zaytoona supports AYB-SD's vocational courses. Revive, the oldest venture, has just turned two but already the social ventures cover 25 per cent of the organisation's operating costs.

'We've completed a business plan that says in the next three years they should sustain 65 per cent of costs and in three years after that they should sustain 100 per cent,' says El Ebrashi.

'People will say I'm very optimistic. Yes, I am, but the strategy is unique and that makes it easy. The cost of any capacity-building project is training, curriculum and marketing. We have Revive's curriculum and the Revive trainers work in the development programme two hours a week. It's easy because it's integrated into our strategy. If you want to get paid you have to volunteer.'

I'm left with cold soup and wondering if El Ebrashi is finding this easy at 25. I can't wait to see what she's doing at 35, or 45 or 55 or 105. ■

## BIOGRAPHY

### NAME

Raghda El Ebrashi

### DATE OF BIRTH

14/04/1983

### FAVOURITE FOOD

Pasta with salmon – 'But only when it's made by my best friend Maryam.'

### FAVOURITE DRINK

Water – 'I'll seem so boring but I love it.'

### CAREER PROFILE

At 13, El Ebrashi volunteered with NGOs, at 15 she entered the American University of Cairo and soon became the first woman to be chair of the student union co-ordinating committee. This was the first step to her establishing an informal student group interested in development for Egypt's poor neighbourhoods. In 2002 the group was formalised as Alashanek Ya Balady and in 2003 it franchised. It is now in five universities. In 2005, the student groups were partnered with a formal NGO of the same name. In 2006, El Ebrashi started her masters in NGO management and the social venture Revive. A year later she finished her masters and started her PhD in social entrepreneurship, as well as launching a second social venture called Zaytoona. The third, Tafaanin, was launched in 2008.

