

Volunteers *with* *Vision*



By Larissa Lawrence
Photos by Ahmad El-Nemr

From its humble beginnings as a student community-service club, Alashanek Ya Balady has grown to a national movement

Raghdha El Ebrashi '04 can trace her passion for community service to a single definitive moment as a 16 year old, when she was working as a volunteer in an earthquake zone in Cairo.

"I met a 12-year-old boy who was uneducated, addicted to drugs and without parents," El Ebrashi said. "After working together, we discovered that he was a talented writer. Four years after we met, his first story was published and that transformed him completely. ... He touched me deeply. Working with him is one thing in my life that I will never forget. It was the first time that I ever changed the life of another person."

One year after meeting the young boy, El Ebrashi entered AUC and wasted no time founding a community-service club, which she named Alashanek Ya Balady (For My Country). Today, five years later, Alashanek Ya Balady has not only withstood the test of time, but has grown into one of the most active service clubs on campus and expanded into a non-governmental organization (NGO) also founded by El Ebrashi. Whether students or

alumni, members of Alashanek Ya Balady all share a love of their country that propels them to volunteer their time to actively develop Egypt's disadvantaged communities.

"Many people see the problems in our country, ... and they want to go to Europe or the United States to escape."

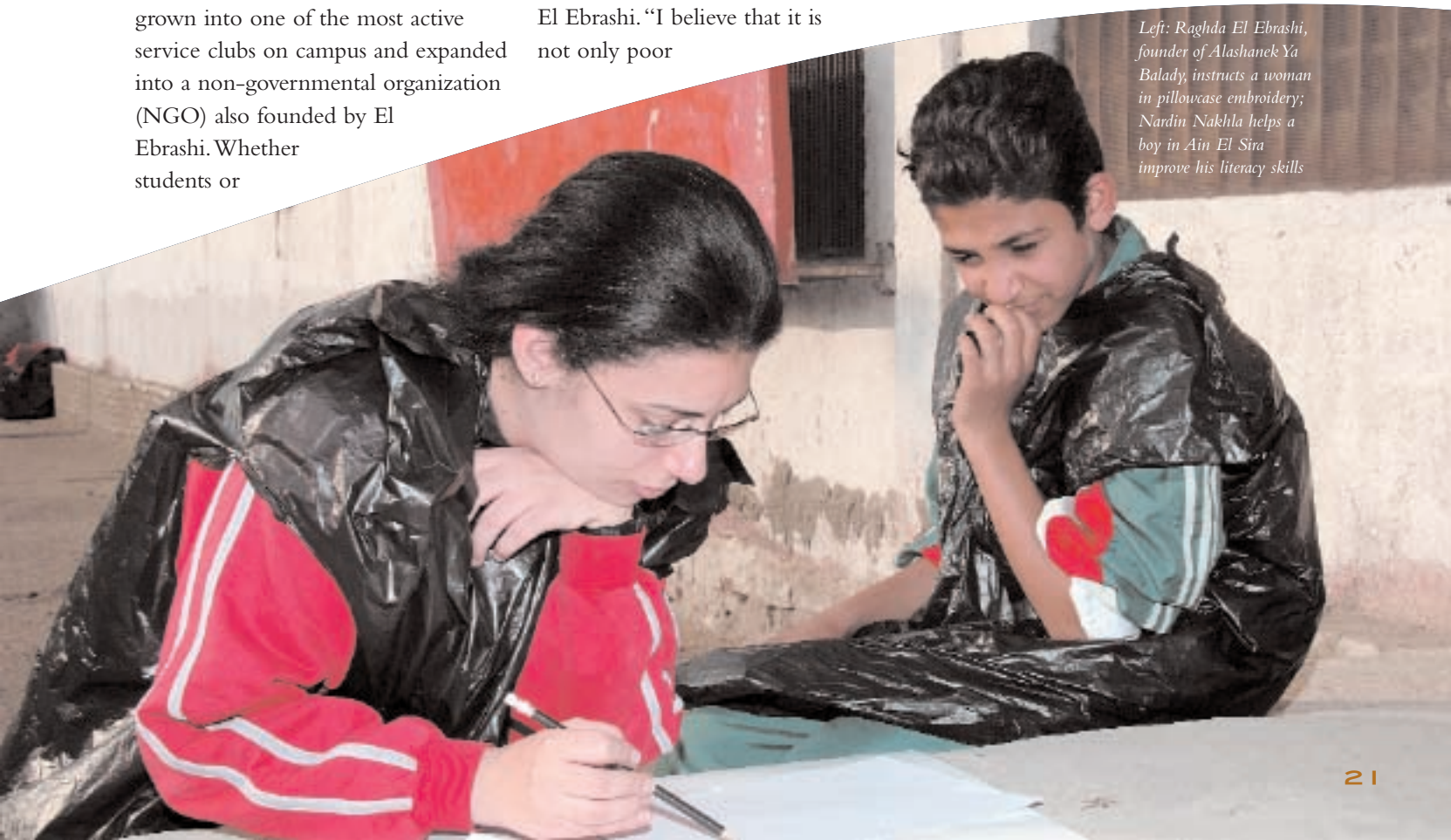
When El Ebrashi first thought of the project, she was set to establish a club that was unique among other pre-existing organizations on campus. Her main aim was for the club to help instill a sense of nationalistic pride in Egyptians. "Many people see the problems in our country — the pollution, the ignorance, the poverty — and they want to go to Europe or the United States to escape," explained El Ebrashi. "I believe that it is not only poor

people who cause these problems. When wealthy, educated people leave the country with their potential, they eliminate opportunities for Egypt's improvement and weaken their own identity."

With that in mind, El Ebrashi named the club Alashanek Ya Balady as a way to address the apathy that is sometimes found among youth. "I wanted to emphasize the responsibility and attachment that wealthy, educated Egyptians should show toward other less fortunate Egyptians," she said, adding that when Alashanek Ya Balady first started, there were many clubs at AUC doing charity work, but not many were directed at development as a cause.

"Most of the clubs were focused on distributing food, clothes and blankets, but few helped create permanent projects for the poor that would continue long enough to make any sort of transformation in the community," she said. "It is

Left: Raghdha El Ebrashi, founder of Alashanek Ya Balady, instructs a woman in pillowcase embroidery; Nardin Nakhla helps a boy in Ain El Sira improve his literacy skills





development, not charity, that will cause Egypt to advance.”

With a long-term goal of establishing a larger service network on a national level, El Ebrashi connected Alashanek Ya Balady with Ain Shams, Cairo and Alexandria universities. The club concentrated its efforts in Ain El Sira, one of the most poverty-stricken districts in Cairo. For the past five years, Alashanek Ya Balady has established an ambitious, multi-faceted program that consists of eradicating illiteracy; teaching language, computer and technical skills; setting up income-generating projects; as well as creating youth development programs. For all members, participating in these activities has given them a feeling of internal satisfaction and pride.

“I feel I am making a difference in people’s lives because I can help them get better jobs by teaching them a foreign language,” said Nour El

Akkad, business management senior and member of the club’s language development program.

Mohamed Ibrahim, computer science sophomore and head of the club’s computer learning center,

“It was incredible seeing how someone could start from zero and make such progress in a short time.”

acknowledged that it is not only the members that exhibit enthusiasm, but also the people of Ain El Sira. “People enrolling in the computer courses are highly motivated and have enormous potential,” he said. “They come because they want to be there, because they want to improve themselves.”

Citing a particular instance, Ibrahim

recalled how one of the female participants started off not knowing that touching a keyboard would cause letters to appear on the screen. Within two months, her knowledge of computers sky-rocketed, and she advanced to an intermediate level. “It was incredible seeing how someone could start from zero and make such progress in a short time. It made me feel that we are doing something worthwhile,” Ibrahim said.

While programs such as computer and language learning are targeted at people of all ages, the youth development program is focused on children in particular. It seeks to educate them on social issues and positive skills, as well as sexual well-being. “In underdeveloped areas like Ain El Sira, children are especially susceptible to physical and sexual abuse,” explained Eman Elba, political science senior who currently serves as president of the club. “At the

“There are disappointments, but there are also success stories, and that is what keeps us optimistic and inspired.”

Left: Mahmoud Ashraf, computer science junior, teaching women how to read and write; Omar Ramadan and Salma Kashmiry (bottom row), Faudi Pitsuan (middle) and Eman Kourtam with children of Ain El Sira



moment, there are few resources in the neighborhood that are easily accessible to children trapped in violent situations.”

Determined to take action, members of Alashanek Ya Balady are receiving professional training from AUC psychology professors on how to conduct trust-building activities and provide self-esteem workshops. When working on such sensitive topics, the establishment of trust and rapport between local children and club members is essential to making the program successful. “These kids need to know that they have a safe corner, somewhere to go,” Elba said.

Aside from teaching and educating people at Ain El Sira, members of Alashanek Ya Balady also set up micro-projects that help families become financially independent. Club members provide funding for the projects, whether they be supermarket kiosks, farms or knitting workshops, and help not only in setting them up, but also in terms of basic budget planning so that a portion of the

income is saved. “The idea is for them not to hold their hands out to charity,” said Nabil Ahmed, mechanical engineering sophomore and a member of the skills and projects program.

He added that although results may take years to materialize, it is worth the investment. “Development is about progress in the long run; you simply

“These kids need to know that they have a safe corner, somewhere to go.”

don’t see instant results,” he explained. “There are disappointments, but there are also success stories, and that is what keeps us optimistic and inspired.”

Working alongside the student club, the NGO El Ebrashi heads, which currently has more than 100 members, provides practical support and guidance to the student club and is working to expand the sense of volunteerism throughout Egypt. Dedicated to the overall development

of Masr El Kadima, where Ain El Sira is located, the NGO seeks to improve people’s living standards through various social, cultural, economic and environmental projects. “Although dear to my heart, it’s not Alashanek Ya Balady that I’m attached to; it is the overall cause,” said El Ebrashi. “I would love to see more and more AUCians take part in development projects that would help push our country forward.”

Echoing the same sense of enthusiasm, Elba noted how volunteering in Alashanek Ya Balady has made a difference in her life. “I’m happy with what I’m doing because I feel the reason we have been blessed in our lives is that we are being held responsible for the less fortunate ones out there. I’m surrounded by people who are full of eagerness and dreams, and seeing how we can affect other people’s lives energizes me to keep on going. ... The practical work we do in the field is much more enriching than all the theoretical studies we learn.” □