

The Beirut Marathon: More Than a “Run” But an Event That Brings People Together from Every “Walk” of Life

By Karen Seidman

Beirut, Lebanon: Once considered the jewel of the Middle East, seemed to have lost some of its stunning luster and sparkling charm a few years back, amidst the region’s chaos of everyday life and troubling news reports underscoring the nation’s struggle to contain civility among its 18 various religious communities.

Enter May El-Khalil, social worker, concerned citizen, sport enthusiast and wife of CEO Board Member and Area Vice President for Africa/Middle East Faysal M. El-Khalil.

Knowing that Beirut could again, with a little help, shine brightly as the true gem it is, and understanding the Lebanese people’s unique vitality, hospitality and its passion for sports and fun – May had an inspired idea. What if she combined these Lebanese traits into one major sporting event? Couldn’t the result be empowerment, goodwill and peace to flourish among this country’s citizenry? In one word: “YES!”

It was five years ago that May established the Beirut Marathon Association (BMA), whose purpose was to organize an annual marathon in Beirut, like those that take place in many other cosmopolitan cities around the globe. And in October 2003, her efforts crossed the finish line. Beirut held its first-ever marathon, hosting 6,000 runners and hundreds of volunteers – of all ages, backgrounds and cultures -- forgetting their differences, all working together in achieving a worthwhile goal. And due to the enormity of its success in its inaugural year, the Beirut International Marathon (BIM) was quickly cemented into the hearts of the Lebanese people and into the country’s yearly event calendar. The 26.2 mile / 42.195km race has grown in size, stature and visibility with each passing year. The most recent BIM took place in 13 November 2005 with more than 17,000 competitors from 77 nations, up from 11,000 runners from 66 countries in 2004.

The sky’s the limit for the 2006 race. Plans are already well underway for the event scheduled for Sunday, 26 November.

“In any other situation, organizing a marathon would be considered a sporting event,” explains Faysal, May’s husband of 31 years and her biggest supporter. “In Lebanon, and thanks largely to May’s efforts, this has become something akin to a national festival which brings people from every walk of life together, where all differences are forgotten, and it has become a time where the country seems to come together.”

But this isn’t just the review of family and close friends, but the Lebanese public at large.

A young Lebanese Internet blogger wrote it nicely: “This marathon gives an image about Lebanon and about what is the real image that the Lebanese want. We are a free people; we

are independent and united, and we want to live FREE and in a democratic society; we run for the freedom today.... Well done BIM. Make the run toward freedom. Unite us all together against the odds facing our dear Lebanon.”

“I strongly believe that the Beirut International Marathon in 2003 was a turning point in the history of sports in Lebanon,” explains May. “The event inspired thousands of people in different ways. For some, it was an interesting way to lose some weight. For many, it was the door to supporting those in need. For others, it represented a challenge that changed their life. In addition to promoting running, health and personal achievement, the BIM also has a humanitarian dimension that aims at making a difference in other people's lives through sports.”

The United Nations also recognizes the important correlation between sports and living a life healthy of body, spirit and mind.

In 2003, the same year as Beirut's first marathon, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, supported the creation of an Inter-agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace because -- as in the words of Mr. Ogi, special adviser to the Secretary General: "Sports remains the best school in life. People learn to manage victory and to overcome defeat to become team player and to be reliable and gain the other team members' confidence. Like the UN, sport is about humanity developing a sense of community and common purpose."

The UN was in full support of May's efforts, and demonstrated that support through sending a multitude of volunteers, staff, peace keepers and project beneficiaries to help out on race day. Two years later, the UN went even further, hailing “sport as a universal language” and marking “2005 as the International Year of Sport.”

But it is not only the annual marathon that the BMA, where May serves as president, puts on, but numerous other 5K and 10K races held throughout the year and throughout Lebanon. In 2006, races were already held on 21 May in Tyre and on 2 April in Tripoli-Mina. Other races are set for 23 July, 13 August and 17 September in Dhennieh, Mizara and Saghbeen, respectively. In fact, it was in Tripoli where *Compass* was able to catch up with May, as she was busily preparing for the upcoming race.

“We now organize races in different Lebanese regions, offer consulting services to race organizers in different countries, hold several events with social and charitable themes, and issues our own sports and health publication to inspire every reader,” explained May.

One thing is for sure, there's no doubt as to May's commitment and passion for her marathon work. She works long and hard to lead the organization in the right direction and winning the race to ensure BIM's continuity in the future.

And she is always ready to take on more projects. May and Faysal are chairing CEO's Lebanon College set for April 2008.