

ADOPT-A-CAMP

a different kind of

MOTHERHOOD

By Hafsa Lodi

NOT YET 40, SAHER SHAIKH IS ALREADY A MOTHER TO ALMOST 30,000 — AN “ADOPTIVE” MOTHER, THAT IS

“I don’t do it for their GRATITUDE, I do it for the same reason a mother would for her CHILD, simply for the joy of seeing them THRIVE and reach their potential.”

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It takes compassion, devotion and selflessness to be a good mother, and Saher Shaikh, founder of Adopt-A-Camp, is the epitome of these caring qualities. A mom of three young children of her own, Saher talks about starting Adopt-A-Camp, the small moments that make her proud, and how residents of the Emirates can help.

The inspiration for Adopt-A-Camp first came to Saher shortly after she and her family moved to the UAE, while she was waiting in a line to pay for her cart full of groceries at the Spinneys in Dubai Marina. The man in front of her was dressed in a blue jumpsuit uniform, and Saher noticed that he was having some trouble paying. “He only had a little bottle of laban and a small bread roll, and didn’t have enough to pay for it,” she recalls. As she looked back to her own pile of groceries, a pricey box of raspberries sitting menacingly in the cart as the “cherry” on top, Saher was overcome with empathy. She asked if he would let her treat him to whatever groceries he wanted, to celebrate her baby son’s birthday, which happened to be on that day. Shy and embarrassed, it took a few minutes to convince him, but he finally went back into the aisles to make a selection. “All he came back with was the tiniest little bottle of Al Arabi strawberry milk,” says Saher. After a few more trips to the supermarket, Saher noticed that the men would often struggle with the nearby ATM machine, as they couldn’t read the directions or understand why the machine would make beeping sounds when they were trying to

withdraw more cash than they had in the account. Saher started talking to them assisting them with simple tasks like this, and they soon started calling her “Baji,” and “Didi,” (affectionate Urdu terms for “sister”).

Saher asked the workers about their lives in the labour camps, and they invited her to come see for herself, so one day, she got into a taxi with her son, and without telling anyone—not even her husband—she went to visit them. “After I saw how they live, I just couldn’t turn back to my normal, comfortable life and forget about them,” she says. Today, Adopt-A-Camp provides for 39 camps, and more than 29,100 workers. Saher works with camp administration to improve and enhance the lives of the men living in functioning camps, and “adopts” camps that have been abandoned by employers, leaving the men without water, electricity and salaries. With the help of volunteers, she takes care of them until they find new work, or are able to return home.

Saher experiences the classic moments of motherly delight, when her eldest comes home with an excellent report card, or when her youngest learns how to speak a new word. “Adopting” a whole new family however, allows for plenty more opportunities to feel pride and joy.

One of these moments took place just a few weeks ago, at the launch of *Inside Sajja | A Labor of Light*, a photography exhibition held at Gulf Photo Plus. Adopt-A-Camp, in a joint venture with photographer Karen Dias, gave digital cameras and photography workshops to a group of abandoned workers from the industrial area of Sajja in Sharjah. The men, who live without running water and electricity, were asked to go back to their camps and to take some shots to

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represent their daily lives. Their photos are currently displayed at the Gulf Photo Plus exhibition space in Al Quoz, and the exhibition will run through February 16th. The workers attended the launch, and with the aid of a few translators, spoke to the guests about their photos. “It’s something that you would never see in Dubai. Professional photographers have gone to the camps and have taken artsy photos of the workers’ lives or how they think their lives are, but it’s never been the boys showing how they live through their own eyes,” says Saher.

Right now, Saher is working on a project with Al Manzil School for Children with Special Needs in Sharjah. Her adopted workers will take part in art workshops with the children who attend the school. “Paints, canvas, my adopted boys and the children—it should be magic,” says Saher. “They have been at the receiving end of so much kindness and goodwill, it’s about time they give back and be contributing parts of the UAE’s community.”

Through Adopt-A-Camp, Saher also holds

hygiene workshops for the workers, where notions like sterilization, getting rid of lice, washing your hands and keeping your body clean are taught. “They’re completely free, on the condition that the boys go back and pass on what they learn to their families and communities,” she says. International medical researcher Dr. Nisar Shah is studying “the Adopt-A-Camp effect,” and has found that since the implementation of these workshops, child mortality rates, deaths in childbirth and skin infections have gone down in the home communities of the workers. “Their entire societies are becoming healthier and stronger, and that makes me so incredibly happy,” says Saher. Adopt-A-Camp also arranges weekly English classes for the workers in partnership with the American University of Dubai, and one of Saher’s most touching memories took place at a graduation ceremony for the courses. “One of the guys did a *bhangra* dance across the stage to receive his certificate—I was in tears!” says Saher.

But the moments that are the most meaningful, Saher says, are those that prove “the

Adopt-A-Camp effect” is true. After one worker had gone back to his home country, his wife gave Saher a telephone call to thank her. She said that her husband had realized that women are to be respected, and had stopped physically abusing her. “I don’t just give them stuff—I try to pass on morals and values like respect for women, respect for other cultures and other religions, and a sense that we are all the same. Human beings are *all* the same,” says Saher.

In addition to improving their lives here in the UAE, Adopt-A-Camp tries to provide financial support for workers’ family members back home who are in need of medical attention, but can’t come close to affording it. “They’re all my boys; their troubles weigh very heavily on me,” says Saher, explaining that the emotional aspects that arise from “adopting” so many workers may be the most challenging part of managing the charity. When one of the workers told Saher that his mother was suffering from bowel cancer, Adopt-A-Camp raised funds for her treatment. “They know that we’re here for them,” says Saher, and although she appreciates the

appreciation of those whom she’s helping, Saher’s dedication to the workers is deep and altruistic. “I don’t do it for their gratitude, I do it for the same reason a mother would for her child, simply for the joy of seeing them thrive and reach their potential,” she says.

“At times, Dubai gets a bad reputation for being superficial and materialistic, and sure, there may be that aspect to the city with certain people here too, but I’m the most blessed person here,” says Saher. “I’ve gotten to see the best part of Dubai, and have met the kindest people who will go so out of their ways to help someone less fortunate, not wanting or expecting anything in return.”

Though Adopt-A-Camp volunteers have increased exponentially since the initiative was founded in 2006, the majority of the Emirates’ populations are still lacking an awareness of the living conditions, trials and troubles of the workers who are responsible for turning our desert cities into rich metropolises. Awareness is the one thing that Saher’s charity strives to continuously create. “Adopt-A-Camp is not about human rights

or social activism, it’s simply about human beings taking care of each other,” she says. Saher explains that the more supporters the group has, the more weight they hold in front of decision makers, especially those creating and passing laws that protect low-income workers in the country. Every “like” that the group gains on Facebook makes it more powerful, and shows that there are people in the UAE and beyond who are watching and who care for those who are less fortunate.

The UAE government, Saher insists, has been extremely accommodating and supportive of Adopt-A-Camp’s endeavours, however, she says that she is shocked by the ignorance and sometimes even complete lack of concern more fortunate Emirates have for the underprivileged community. “It drives me insane that there are people who will go to Starbucks and have a cappuccino for 25 dirhams without thinking, without even blinking an eye, but when it comes to giving an extra 25 dirhams to charity, then suddenly, funds are tight,” says Saher. “Gestures don’t need to be grand or fancy, just treat the people around you with respect. Open the

door for a guy in a blue uniform next time you see one. Or give the maid a little extra at Christmas or Eid.”

Though friends and fellow volunteers always encourage Saher to look into purchasing office space, hire a full-time staff and expand Adopt-A-Camp, she remains wary. “It’s a personal thing for me,” she says. “Where I would like to see this go, is if someone could attend the photography exhibition, see the boys’ lives through their own eyes, walk away, and then look at the men on the sides of the roads with a fresh sense of perspective.”

According to Saher, “It’s not about office space or staff, it’s about reaching hearts and minds.” After all, lavishly decorated lobbies and a team of perfectly poised personnel matter little to a mother who wants nothing more than for her children to be appreciated and respected for the human beings they are.