



2008 FTW Ride

May 2-15, 2008

Event Highlights



LEBANON

Two terrific biking days in the Lebanese countryside: 20 kilometers from Baakleen to Sidon and 30 kilometers Keb Elias to Rashaya. It was culturally rich with drums, sword dancers, young girls in colored gowns, elder men erupting into a capella songs, wine tasting at Chateau Kefraya winery. We were all given colorful Lebanese flags which looked beautiful draped on shoulders. Delicious local food usually featured pitas toasted atop a burner that looked like a gigantic upside down wok.



The Danes on their tandem in front of gas station built of *marble!*

Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps We visited Sabra and Shatila Martyrs Square where the 1982 massacres of hundreds of Palestinian civilians occurred by Lebanese soldiers under the aegis of the Israeli military, as thoroughly documented in a comprehensive book called "Sabra and Shatila: September 1982" by Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout (Pluto Press, 2004). Of the fifty-nine Palestinian refugee camps in the region, Sabra and Shatila is considered one of the poorest with meager resources or opportunities.



Sabra, Shatila Martyrs Square



SYRIA

Golan Heights. Once again we went to the Golan Heights to witness the bombed hospital, the closed border, the United Nations presence, the ubiquitous barbed wire, the silence of destroyed villages. The cultural ceremony presented by the former villagers was very emotional – pre-teens in white tutus dancing delicately, an all-male dance with fancy footwork and flying splits, the blind man whose voice reverberated into your soul. At the Shouting Hill we waved white scarves and Syrian flags in support of the reunification of the Golan Heights. Israel destroyed over 230 villages in the Golan Heights and continues to occupy this territory. The state of war prevents families on one side from seeing their brethren on the other side. A superb movie about this is The Syrian Bride.



Cycling into the Golan Heights.

Palestinian Refugee Camp Syria has nine Palestinian refugee camps run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), one of which is located in Damascus. Al-Husainia Camp, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, was not a destination on the 2008 FTW itinerary, but several teams pushed to go and we were able to convince our Syrians hosts to deviate from the schedule and take us. The residents waving flags and olive branches lined the long street leading to the social center. There was not a program, rather we mingled with the refugees inside and through interpreters heard their stories. Many of us cried hearing the agony of the elderly who yearn to return to their home villages. Third and fourth generations are growing up not allowed to know their ancestral lands as Israel will not permit the original villagers or their progeny even a visit.



Left, refugee holding her UN card. Right, Laurie Hartman of U.S. team with refugee listening to translation of the woman's story

U.S. Team presents Iran Team with Peace Cranes



Above, Ora McGuire Right, the box of peace cranes

Ora Lora Spadafora McGuire is an 85 year old resident of Walpole, Massachusetts whose spiritual contribution to world peace is to make paper cranes using Japanese origami technique. She carries rice paper with her and gives a peace crane to most everyone she meets and tells them the story of Sadako.

Sadako was born in Hiroshima in 1943, two years before the U.S. military dropped the atomic bomb. Ten years later Sadako developed leukemia. An ancient Japanese legend says to fold a thousand paper cranes to have a long life, since cranes symbolize longevity. Sadako began making peace cranes in hopes of healing but died after completing 645 cranes.

Millions of peace cranes have been sent to Hiroshima to honor Sadako's courage and her dream of folding a thousand paper cranes. Because of this child, people the world over have come to understand that this tragedy must never happen again and that peace must come to the world. A statue of Sadako holding a golden crane was erected in Hiroshima Peace Park in 1958 with these words: *This is our cry, This is our prayer: Peace in the world.*



Below, U.S. Team Coordinator Octavia Taylor presenting box of peace cranes to Iranian team members, far right Jalel Parvin.



In the spring of 2008, Ora went to Blessed Sacrament elementary school in Walpole to teach the children how to make peace cranes and tell them Sadako's story. She mentioned this to her daughter, Colleen McGuire, an FTW rider, and Colleen asked if the cranes could be given to the Iran FTW team in the upcoming FTW ride in May, 2008. Most of the children's cranes were presented to the Peace Abbey in Sherbourne, Massachusetts, but Ora reserved a box of cranes to mail to Octavia Taylor, the US team's coordinator who received it in the nick of time before leaving for the 2008 ride. Hats off to Octavia for making space in her limited luggage to carry the box of cranes.

At a small gathering in Damascus the US team presented the Iranian team the box of colorful peace cranes. We lamented the prevailing atmosphere of war between our countries under the administrations of George Bush and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. We hoped that the spirit of our peace cranes would resonate and make changes in both countries. After the ride Parnaveh Vahidmanesh of the Iran FTW team distributed the peace cranes to Iranian schoolchildren.



U.S. Team, Iran Team and Syrian First Lady Madame Asma al-Assad

First Lady, Madame Asma al-Assad did not bike with riders this year. Instead we went to a reception hall where she met with us on a more intimate level. She gave a short speech, and then mingled with each country's team, taking time to hear our stories, our messages, our questions.

Following our Peace Crane event (see page 3), the U.S. and Iran teams decided to meet with Madame Assad together instead of as individual teams. The First Lady was told "This is the U.S. team and the Iran team." Without missing a beat, she cleverly quipped, "Ah, the Axis of Evil." Everyone got a good laugh. How wonderful that we could all talk instead of brandishing swords and threats at each other.

On Our Voices webpage, you can see the 9 minute video of Mrs. Assad's speech with footage at the end of her mingling with FTW teams.



As the founder and preeminent spokeswoman for FTW, **Detta Regan** is required to speak at every event, every reception, every formal exchange with the locals. She is a very eloquent but simple speaker — never haranguing or yelling into the microphone, but in a no-nonsense tone pointedly calling for justice. Detta is also the recipient of every gift our hosts give Follow the Women, large or small. She now brings an extra piece of empty luggage just to haul back the loot! Detta's daughters claim that she has a room filled just with Follow the Women gifts. Perhaps it is the infant stages of an FTW museum?

Detta Regan receives a sword in Damascus



JORDAN

As has been the custom, a military bagpipes band met us in Jordan when we arrived at the border by bus in the dark. A tedious wait for passports turned into an entertaining event when the Arab teams broke out yet again into a spontaneous round of traditional singing and dancing.

It is always difficult to carve out time from the FTW itinerary to have group discussions because our hosts yearn for our company. Yet, late one night in Jordan we met and discussed the ongoing dilemma of how to include Israelis and more Jewish women. Israeli inclusion needs to be done in a way that is acceptable and do-able for Arab teams. We have not yet solved the dilemma.

Our last night in Jordan was spent at the **Dead Sea** sleeping overnight in Bedouin tents. It's exciting to stay in Bedouin tents but this year an Arab friend remarked to several Americans that tents are what his family are used to sleep in, not for thrills or adventure but as housing when they became refugees. It made us feel sheepish to enjoy the tents so much.

Right, US team members in Amman, left to right, Betty Poynton, and Mary Bennett of Massachusetts, Laurie Hartman of Vermont, Colleen McGuire of New York.



Left, our Bedouin tents at the Dead Sea in Jordan. Right, cycling in Amman



Aqbat Jabr Refugee Camp



PALESTINE

After a good five hours spent being processed by Israel to enter Palestine, we finally crossed the Allenby Bridge. However, this year the Israelis did not let us bicycle to the Palestine border into Jericho.

Aqbat Jabr Refugee Camp In Jericho we visited Aqbat Jabr refugee camp in existence since 1948. Approximately 7,000 people live in the camp, many of them children. We saw the deteriorated shape of their playground, everything broken. The British team were particularly anguished by the lack of operable equipment and resolved that there would be a working playground for the children by the next ride in 2009.

Also in Jericho we watched the documentary "Women in Struggle" about Palestinian women who were political detainees incarcerated in Israeli jails. The insightful film was made by Buthina Canaan Khoury, a Palestinian filmmaker.



Yassir Arafat's tomb in Ramallah, "FTW" written in candles



May 15, 1948. The 60th anniversary of Israel's Day of Remembrance is marked on May 15, the day it declared itself a state. This is a day of enormous celebration for Jews in Israel but for Arabs and Palestinians it is called the Nakba, which means catastrophe. The creation of the state of Israel through the United Nation's Partition Plan (U.N. Resolution 181) led to the loss of two-thirds of historic Palestine in 1948. Today, Palestinians occupy less than 23% of historic Palestine, their homeland for centuries and centuries. FTW quietly departed Palestine on the morning of May 15.



Top, Mutee'ah, her sister and their children. Photos below, refugee camp children

Mutee'ah's Home USA Team leader Octavia Taylor describes the American team's overnight stay with a Palestinian family: We spent our last night in Rumaneh in the home of Mutee'ah. Her husband was away working as a construction worker for three months at a time in Israel. While he was away she managed the household and the activities of her six children, as well as supporting her sister and her children, whose husband was currently serving a six-month sentence for having evaded the checkpoint by crossing the border at a unsupervised break in the wall.

This is probably the most stunning fact about traveling through Palestine: every women we spoke to had a father, brother, or uncle who had been detained, imprisoned or killed by the Israelis. I spoke to several men who had been imprisoned and tortured. Perhaps we were speaking to a select few, yet it's hard to come away from these stories unfeeling. The Israeli government policies, supported by the US, coupled with the ineffectual Fatah and Hamas parties have caused ordinary people to suffer with no visible prospect for improvement.

