

The Lebanese Ladies Cultural Society in Southern California: Celebrating Twenty Years

■ Nancy Jabbra

Chair, Department of Women's Studies,
Loyola Marymount University, USA

Beginnings

The earliest Lebanese in Southern California arrived around the turn of the twentieth century. Originally, they lived in an area east of downtown Los Angeles, still home to recent immigrants. Later, they moved west of downtown, as the location of their principal religious institutions shows us. Today's Lebanese are more widely scattered, with a substantial community in Orange County east of Los Angeles County. Most of the founders of the Lebanese Ladies Cultural Society live in or near Pasadena, an affluent city northeast of downtown Los Angeles.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Arab-Americans generally are a prosperous, well-educated, and professional group. The Lebanese remain the most numerous and affluent among Arab-Americans, and a substantial proportion among them are American-born and speak only English. Over sixty percent of foreign-born Lebanese immigrated after 1979, that is, during the worst of the civil war years. These general outlines also characterize the Lebanese population in Southern California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

The Lebanese Ladies Cultural Society (LLCS) emerged rather gradually in the mid-1980s. First, an informal group began to gather in one woman's home for lunch, coffee, and bingo. Bit by bit the group grew, and they began to call themselves the "*Subhiyyat Lubnan*" (roughly, the Lebanese Ladies' Brunches). Next, and accounts vary, a few of the women wanted something more than bingo and lunch. They invited speakers, some of whom impressed upon them the dire situation in Lebanon and chided them for their seeming frivolity in their concern about their homeland. After that, they moved toward finding a purpose and a

name, and creating an organization. Children's education seemed basic, and the *Subhiyyat* were all Lebanese. Together with a member's husband and a local lawyer of Lebanese origin, they created the organization's by-laws and tax-exempt status, and found a Lebanese accountant to keep track of their financial records. The first president of the organization took office in 1986.

One of the members' basic tasks was to create ways of raising funds to support children's scholarships and to allocate these funds efficiently and fairly to needy but worthy students. One of the impressive strengths of the organization was the realization of the members that religion, political affiliation, and direct association with a specific Lebanese region should not be considered as prerequisites for organizational membership, nor for the children who are sponsored. Several of the women interviewed emphasized these important principles.

Activities

Fundraising

The *Subhiyyat* made a slight amount of extra money from bingo, and as they began to organize, they assessed nominal membership dues. After the LLCS was formed with the purpose of supporting children, it needed to do more. For a few years, they held fashion shows and bazaars in members' homes. Nevertheless, none of these early means of fundraising yielded much.

The Society's fundraising efforts took a major step forward with the involvement of two prominent Lebanese Americans, Dr. Ray Irani of Occidental Petroleum and the late Dr. Joseph Jacobs of Jacobs Engineering. The former

proposed to contribute each year to a matching fund; the entire proceeds of both his contribution plus the entire amount collected by the Ladies goes directly to scholarships in Lebanon. Dr. Jacobs began by making annual contributions, and then started the F.M. Jabara Endowment Fund in honor of his father-in-law; at his death, he willed the Society \$1,000,000, which was placed in the Joseph Jacobs Endowment Fund. These two funds are invested, with the interest going to the children.

Additional sources of income include the membership dues, monies from monthly cultural activities, contributions from donors both large and small, and the enormous gala dinner usually held in March. At this dinner, seats at tables are sold for high prices, individuals, families, and businesses purchase advertisements in the program book, and there is a silent auction of donated art and other items. The gala typically raises well over \$100,000.

Assessing and Supporting the Children

This complex operation joins California and Lebanon through a kinship network and a set of procedures designed to ensure fairness, efficiency, and trust. The main function of the Scholarship Committee, based in California, is to approve the scholarship recipients, ensuring that they are both truly needy and academically sound. The representatives in Lebanon, all of them volunteers, are best able, because of their location, to assess their children, families, and schools. They take the applications to the school principals, and then send these in person, together with their recommendations, to the Scholarship Committee. After making its decisions, the Scholarship Committee wires the money to a bank in Lebanon, where it is collected and distributed.

The distribution process ensures that the students actually receive the scholarship and that it is spent accordingly. The checks go directly to the school principals, but both the students and their parents are notified. In addition, the LLCS members insist upon receiving thank-you letters from the children.

The links between the Lebanese Ladies Cultural Society and its representatives in Lebanon are traditional, but effective. Almost all of the representatives are relatives of California members, and the rest are well known to them. As every woman interviewed explained, this is how they could be sure that they could trust their representatives in Lebanon. Moreover, it is members and representatives who hand-carry the applications and recommendations — and in the old days, the funds, too.

Cultural and Social Activities

Nearly every month except during the summer the Society holds a luncheon or evening event with a cultural theme. Sometimes there is a speaker. Other times the women meet at a special location. Recent events include a visit to the

home of Lebanese American master artisan Sam Maloof and his wife, a trip to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley, and a one-man show on the life of Kahlil Gibran. One evening featured Lebanese-Canadian singer and composer Paul Anka.

The gala dinner is meant to be entertaining, with the women in evening gowns and the men in tuxedos. The food is good, the space is attractive, a prominent Lebanese American is honored, there is Lebanese music, and eventually there is dancing.

Conclusion

The Lebanese Ladies Cultural Society shows both strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths lie in both the Ladies' use of tradition and in their rejection of it. They rely on kinship and other close ties to link California and Lebanon through trust. They emphasize Lebanese heritage and honor Americans of Lebanese origin.

At the same time, they reject sectarianism, political affiliation, and regional origins in both their membership and in the children they sponsor. This is a major break with practice in Lebanon, and was not initially easy to achieve.

Other strengths lie in their teamwork and cooperation, in their mutual respect for each other, and in their reliance on each woman's talents. Because everyone both in California and in Lebanon volunteers their time, the organization's overhead costs are minimal.

At the same time, there are a few weak points that will need to be addressed, and several women commented on these. First, although they are justly proud of supporting, through the end of secondary school, nearly 700 students per year, they are beginning to find that they are reaching the capacity of the number of students they can assess and sponsor. It is a lot of work. Second, after twenty years of such philanthropic activities, they now need to reach out to younger women to carry on the work of the organization in the future. As one woman remarked, "It is always the same few who are active," however, they cannot go on indefinitely.

Endnote

* Gratitude is extended to the many individuals who so graciously gave of their time, expertise, and hospitality to assist the author with this article. They include Leila Mishalany, Leila Masri, Leila Milkie, Fred Milkie, Falak Beyhum, and Denise Kafrouni in California, and Leila Ajam and Aida Saroufim in Lebanon. None of them is responsible for any mistakes in this article.

References

- U.S. Census Bureau (2005). We the People of Arab Ancestry in the United States; Census 2000 Special Reports, March 2005, prepared by Angela Brittingham and G. Patricia de la Cruz.