



ANISSA NAJJAR

A social work veteran who, for twenty five years directed a successful village welfare project in Lebanon.

As a student and graduate of the American University of Beirut, Anissa Rawda Najjar actively participated in the Village Welfare projects initiated and sponsored by AUB during the thirties. Her interest in village welfare persisted after her marriage, when she joined a group of women volunteers who had formed the nucleus of a welfare project for a few Lebanese villages located in three districts of the country.

In 1951 the group created the Village Welfare Association, opened a central office in Beirut and started clubs for village women between fifteen and twenty-five years of age, giving them instruction in hygiene, nutrition, child care and sewing. They soon found out that to ensure the continuity of the work they should approach the younger generation by opening for them regular schools in their villages. Mrs. Najjar was able to convince the members of the group that the project should meet the village needs and provide the village girls with instruction which government schools did not offer. "The literacy of the mind" was the thing they needed, i.e. knowledge which would awaken their initiative and help them to improve their living conditions. They should be taught to be money earners and share in the household expenditures. Besides courses in health, nutrition, first-aid, child care, budgeting and civic education, they were taught household crafts such as jam making, canning, farming, pottery, sewing and other money making activities which paved the way for reading, writing and arithmetic. As soon as the programs were set, they were put into practice. The problem of housing arose but the joint efforts of the volunteers were able to solve it. A subsidy from the government and grants from various donors allowed them to build two schools, one in Knaisseh, the other in Deirkusheh, on land offered by the villagers. Both schools are in the Chouf mountainous district. The first is elementary, the second includes intermediate classes.

They are provided with teachers who prepare students for the Rural Certificate which requires the holder to remove the illiteracy of at least one person in her village or district. The Rural Brevet is prepared by the Deirkusheh school. A book was compiled and published for the use of the teachers. It supplemented government textbooks with practical knowledge needed by the villagers. Another book, **Ten Stories from the Village**, was made to give comprehensive and practical lessons in public health. Mrs. Najjar was president of the Association from 1956 to 1959 and again from 1960 until now.

Between 1960 and 1974 the work expanded. Dispensaries were created. Besides the project carried out in the Chouf district, 25 villages in other parts of Lebanon were covered by an itinerant group of paid workers including a nurse and teachers who taught housekeeping and household arts. New money-earning projects were introduced: poultry raising, bee keeping, basket-making, silkworm raising and silk weaving which led to the production of silk mantles or abayas.

The finances of the Association depend on subscriptions and donations from the Association members and supporters, volunteer work, government subsidy and a yearly contribution varying between LL 1000 and 3000 from UNESCO as a result of Mrs. Najjar's effort when she visited the United States by invitation in 1960. Her membership in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom gives her the opportunity to receive certain gifts in kind for the project. The two schools in Chouf now accommodate more than a thousand students who come from nine villages in buses provided by the V.W.A.

The war years have retarded the work and created new needs. Fewer women and men are now willing to do volunteer work and Mrs. Najjar has to face heavier responsibility. But to her this is an incentive for further activity.