

Nadeem H. Shweiri



Mr. Nadeem H. Shweiri with two handicapped workers (1963).

Founder of "Al-Kafa-at" Rehabilitation Institute, Beirut, Lebanon.

His slogan : "Potentials not Handicaps" ; "Arms that give, not hands begging alms".

Mr. Nadeem H. Shweiri is indeed a living witness to the truth of the old saying : "Faith can make wonders."

Starting his work 18 years ago with three handicapped people : one blind, one deaf and one amputee, he was able, after 13 years, to enroll 140 handicapped workers who produced, with the help of a machine and the instruction of a qualified leather technician from town, 1.5 million leather bags. Their work yielded the profits that allowed him to build the present medico-social, educational and vocational complex on land he had inherited from his father.

Let us hear his story as he told it, but, for lack of space, it is here retold in an abridged form.

In 1957, while he was an M.A. student at A.U.B., he started a project for destitute young girls living in shady environments. His project developed into a catering school with 137 graduates, distributed in first class hotels and restaurants.

In 1959, two social cases were referred to him who, because of physical handicaps, could not climb the steps of the school building. This instance inspired a handicapped young girl, Nabeela George, who had become an artist in spite of her ten polio-stricken fingers, to send him some of her paintings, asking him to sell them and use the income to start a rehabilitation institute for the physically disabled.

That is how the Kafa-at (abilities) Institute was born.

Several congregations participated in its creation and development. One is "Our Lady of the Apostles", whose nuns have been sharing in its activities since 1959 and are still going on. Another is the Bible Lands Society, represented by its secretary, Mr. C.R. Clothier.

The project kept growing. The initial prosthetic shop, started in 1963, has expanded into 1) sheltered workshops; 2) a brace shop; 3) a free school for poor, physically impaired students, now 350 in number, who go through the elementary and intermediate grades into the vocational sections where they learn appropriate trades which help their placement in remunerative jobs; 4) a regional training center of technicians in orthotics and prosthetics, which, in 1972, trained 11 students from the Arab countries and is currently training 9 from Lebanon.

Other projects have been added : 1) a school for the deaf accommodating 80 students, who receive a special program of general instruction followed by vocational training; 2) a school for the mentally retarded, 60 at present, who go through a special program till the age of 15, then into handicraft, farming and horticultural training till the age of 20, to end up in a village set-up which the Institute is building for them; 3) a section was opened last year for cerebral palsied children, now 50 in number, who go into the school sections that suit their aptitudes and receive medical treatment at the Physico-Therapy Department created by the Institute.

An intensive, industrial training program will be started within weeks, including 6 trades for 72 physically impaired adults. The course will last 4 months and will be given in two annual sessions.

In 1978, Al-Kafa-at was officially recognized as a non-profit, public benefit organization, receiving financial aid from the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs through the "Social Development Office". It is directed by a group of socially-minded individuals, constituting its Board of Trustees. The founder is a council member of "Rehabilitation International". The universal character of the Institute is shown in its interdenominational chapel, open to all creeds.

Speaking of his 20 year experience, Mr. Shweiri says : "Social welfare is to be considered as investments in dignity and not disbursements on handicaps. The yield would be to generate brotherhood, love and financial means to help others. In this way the gracious circle of love would grow."