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Unlike most other bookstores and libraries, L'Arche de Noé is not just a commercial shop. It's a small place with a big message. The founder and owner Mrs. Leila Amad Bissat hoped that she could make a difference by opening this bookstore. Because of the war, Ras Beirut was transformed from a center of culture and civilization into an area full of bars and cheap nightclubs. This fact greatly saddened Mr. and Mrs. Bissat for they had lived there most of their lives. Ras Beirut had given them a great deal and it was time to return the favor. With the help of some friends, they decided to buy out the bars and open respectable shops in their places one of which is L'Arche de Noé.

Coming from a background that encouraged culture, personal accomplishment and innovation, Mrs. Bissat became aware of the importance of reading in shaping the future generation. As a student at the College Protestant, she noticed how the well-read and cultured students usually excelled in their fields. This observation convinced her at an early age of the importance of books and reading. Mrs. Bissat obtained a BA in Sociology in 1976, and when the war ended, "opening a bookstore for children seemed to be the best idea." Not only is L'Arche de Noé a bookstore, but also a library where children can sit and enjoy reading all kinds of books and stories. The books are displayed in such a manner as to motivate children to read: "I used to have a hard time finding the books I wanted in the



libraries. The employees were usually unhelpful, and it took me forever to find a certain book. This is why I stress on the organization and display of books, especially that we're dealing mainly with children." The bookstore also offers computer courses, crafts, and summer tutoring for children.

Only nonviolent educational toys and games are sold at L'Arche de Noé. Mrs. Bissat asserted: "this generation has been exposed to enough violence during the war. Promoting such toys, I think, would only drive them to accept violence all the more." Although commercial toys such as machine guns are highly in demand, she insists on adhering to principles and not selling such toys.

In order to further accomplish her aims and promote the bookstore in a more credible way, Mrs. Bissat came up with the brilliant idea of holding an exhibition once a year. The exhibition goes on for a month where books, songs, toys and gadgets related to the theme of the exhibition are sold. The first exhibition was on the environment, one of Mrs. Bissat main concerns. This concern was nurtured in Vienna, where Mrs. Bissat lived for three years. In Vienna, she had time to work on herself in a cultural and artistic environment. She was greatly affected by the Green Peace Movement and became more environmentally aware. This is why her first exhibition was on the importance of a clean healthy environment and the dangers of pollution. The second exhibition was on Beirut and was entitled, "Heritage of a Past, Vision of a Future." The original colors of Beirut, the kinds of trees that used to grow in Beirut, the architecture of the city and its history drew many people to this exhibition. Both exhibitions were a great success.

Mrs. Bissat stressed on the important role of parents, schools and television programs in encouraging children to read. Unfortunately parents are not exerting enough effort: "The age where children acquire the habit of reading is between ten and twelve years, and parents must motivate children to read at this age." Mrs. Bissat also blames the governmental institutions concerned with this issue particularly the Ministry of Education. Such institutions are not devoting enough time, attention, or work: "The work we do at L'Arche de Noé can only be done on a small scale, but the government has the means to encourage reading and the promotion of educational books and toys on a national level." With the help of TALA Institute for educational toys, Mrs. Bissat produced an educational game on Beirut. By playing this game the children not only have fun but they also learn very basic information about their city, Beirut: "Such toys and games are really needed to replace other harmful and disturbing toys that children play with today."

Mrs. Bissat advises all women not to remain idle for, in her opinion, work makes a person more organized, punctual and decisive. In the working environment, you are exposed to all kinds of people and you learn how to deal with them: "In this manner, you will have more respect for people and for yourself. You will start assessing people's behavior and actions from a different angle, and with more awareness and rationality." Mrs. Bissat chose a career with a flexible schedule so that she can give her children the time they need. Her son and daughter constantly come to the library and are very proud of their mother's accomplishment. Mrs. Bissat opened L'Arche de Noé five years ago when her son was twelve years old and her daughter only eight. Mrs. Bissat asserts, "I owe it all to my husband's full unconditional support. He was there for me, helping me through every step of the way."

# Not just

## A COMMERCIAL BOOKSTORE