

# A Twelve Year Old Municipal President

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Ghena Majzoub, a twelve year old student at the National Institute for Girls and Boys - Saida, was elected president of the first Lebanese Municipal Council for Children in December, 1999. According to Ms. Nigar Hankeer, coordinator of the Municipal Council for Children - Hariri Foundation, the creation of this council took place at the initiative of Mrs. Bahia Hariri, who came to know about the idea while on a visit to Tunisia. The idea appealed to Mrs. Hariri and she introduced it to the principals of various schools, as well as representatives from the Higher Council for Childhood in Lebanon, the Arab Council for Childhood and Development, the Lebanese National Commission for UNESCO and the Ministry of Education who welcomed such an initiative in Lebanon. However, Hankeer maintains that Mrs. Hariri insisted on not copying the Tunisian model but molding it to fit Lebanese standards: "the Council had to fit our needs, customs, as well as traditions. Unlike Tunisia, where candidates are nominated, we have opted in favor of electing the members, the aim of the Municipal Council being to educate the children on engaging in democratic life."

As a result, on the occasion of the International Day for Children in 1999, Mrs. Hariri called upon interested individuals to come forth to found a municipal council for chil-

dren. The first municipal council was founded in Saida and given that the experience was successful, the Hariri Foundation repeated it all over Lebanon. According to Hankeer: "We currently have four councils in Saida, Tyr, Nabatieh and Tripoli. By the end of May, the Beirut and Ikleem Al-Kharoub councils will hold their elections. We are also collaborating with interested parties in Jbeil and Baabda to found such Councils there."

Hankeer asserts that it is wrong to believe in the prevalent misconception that 12 year olds are young and have no vision. "From my experience in working with the children at the Council, I can say that they have proved to be active citizens in society, able to engage in democratic life through their regular meetings and interaction among each other." The children meet once a week. The coordinator, Ms. Hankeer and the President of the Council prepare the agenda for each meet-

ing. Last year, the children had a hectic schedule, they organized a lot of activities such as forestration, cleaning campaigns and took part in all national celebrations. Moreover, they participated in the Liberation Competition, an annual competition organized to commemorate the liberation of Saida from Israeli occupation. For this year, a music concert and other activities are planned jointly with other councils.





Ghena Majzoub

According to Ghena Majzoub, President of the Municipal Council for Children - Saida, the idea all started when Mrs. Bahia Hariri visited her school to tell the students about the foundation of a municipal council for children. Majzoub explained that the candidates who stood for election had to be six elementary students. Ghena explained that 33 different schools, both public and private, participated in the elections and the council managed to bring together children from all classes, religions, and nationalities. The preliminary elections took place in the 33 schools and 33 representatives were elected (one from each school). According to Ghena: "The 33 candidates served as the council's representatives. We met to get to know each other and then formed an administrative council. What is funny is that we had two alliances, the boys' alliance and the girls' alliance. All the boys presented their candidacy for presidency, whereas we, girls, united and nominated 3 candidates and this is how I was able to win the presidency last year."

Majzoub recounts how she was elected president: "Given that the six elementary class at my school has 7 sections, each section had 3 student candidates that were running for elections. I was elected representative for my section and then I had to run against the other 6 representatives. We were 2 girls and 5 boys competing for the position." However, Ghena admits that there was no real competition

because most of her colleagues withdrew in her favor. After winning the elections at her school there was the race for the presidency. "The race was among the 33 representatives from the different schools. They were 18 boys and 15 girls. What happened is that all the boy representatives wanted to run for presidency whereas the girls didn't. So the boys lost their votes against each other and I gained a lot of support from the girls, especially one of the girls who tried to convince her colleagues that they should elect me. Finally, we were left with two candidates competing for presidency, me and another boy, the final countdown was very close and the boy lost by one vote. I was elected in October, 1999 and served for one year. This year, there is a new president and he is a boy. My parents were very happy and my mother couldn't believe it. She was so proud of me. I enjoyed the experience because it was very rich and interesting. The year passed very quickly and I was not very eager to leave. However, I realized the importance of giving a chance to other people."

Ghena dreams of becoming a doctor. According to her, "people are bound to get sick and I want to be there to lend a helping hand. My parents often encourage me to pursue my dreams." Ghena maintains that she enjoyed her work at the Council because it taught her how to participate in political and public life. She believes that this experience will affect her future positively.