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The Beirut Blast and the Queer Community

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This piece is a modified transcript of a pre-recorded podcast episode for Shabakat el-Meem. The podcast covered the topic of the Beirut blast and its impact on members of the queer community, with a focus on the Queer Relief Fund.

Lary BS¹: It's a day I will never forget in my entire lifetime. There is something that broke in us that day. The idea that we live in a government that pays zero attention to its citizens. After everything happened after the blast, all the reparations that happened, none of the assistance was targeting or helping the queer community. Thankfully, I have the privilege of not needing people, but I would never wish upon anyone to be in such a situation...But a lot of the people we know, are not in the same situation. So, when Sandra [Melhem] proposed the Queer Relief Fund, the people who could support her, we immediately had her back.

For the blast, I was in the blast. I was in Gemmayze, I was on Gemmayze street when it happened, in the building of the Gemmayze café, in an office. I was in a meeting, we were done with the meeting, and we were happy, then suddenly the blast happens, and it explodes. I live in Geitaoui, so, the phones weren't working, I had no idea if something happened to my parents, I was worried that my parents had no idea whether I was okay or not. So, I ran like a crazy person, my nose dripping blood, I have stitches now above my lips, above my upper lip. I ran like a crazy person in the street, everyone was screaming, everything is on the floor, in order to reach Geitaoui to just check up on my parents and to just tell them that I'm okay. There is also the issue of hospitals, I was looking for a hospital that has the capacity to welcome us. All hospitals in Beirut were full, until we thought about going to Saida at some point, then we eventually found a spot in St. Therese Hospital after we went to seven hospitals in the beginning.

Sandra Melhem²: When the blast happened, I was in the car near Beirut Digital District. So, when the first explosion happened, everyone was saying it's the "Center House" that exploded. It was

something very shocking. I live in Achrafieh, so, on the way from Beirut Digital District to Achrafieh, what was very traumatizing for me was the blood and glass that was falling on the people while they were walking. When I arrived home, the house was destroyed completely. On that night, we ended up leaving Beirut. And, I think, four days after the blast, we were cleaning Mar Mikhael, Karantina, and everything.

A lot of our friends would call us to tell us that they lost their homes, they don't know where to go. All of this, keeping in mind that, at the same time, there was COVID-19, so no one had really had a proper income all year long. At this point, we could either sit at home, cry, and wait for the government to respond to the situation, or we could do something. To be very honest, the position we were in, in the queer community...We have broad access to the community. So, we went on Instagram and we posted that, please, whoever from the queer community, was affected or injured from the blast, please reach out. At the same time, we created a GoFundMe campaign.

The initial target for the GoFundMe was \$10,000. Within nine hours, we reached \$15,000. So, we increased the target and we started accepting more cases. At this point now, in December [2021], we have 234 cases that we're helping in terms of repairs, relocation, rent assistance, food, medications, operations post-blast, income.

Why was there such a big need for this [initiative]? Because, you feel that the members of the community do not feel comfortable asking for support from people they cannot relate to. Already, during "ordinary" times, the community was already disregarded. Even before the blast, maybe 30% of the community had needs prior to the Blast that weren't being met at all.

L: And then, the Blast happened, and worsened their conditions.

S: Yes, and relying on the [Lebanese] Government to help is like playing Russian Roulette with your life. At this point, there was a sense of social responsibility from our end, all of us. The

community was standing by us all throughout these years, with everything we've done, the minimum we could do, we, the people who are able to stand by this community, is to stand by them.

L: Yes, to stand by them, exactly.

S: For me, this is what this [Queer Relief] Fund is about. It was also very therapeutic for all of us. Instead of sitting at home, we had a schedule. Every day at 10 a.m., we would meet up and work, around 50 of us.

L: It's true. This [work] is done alongside the other festivals that we worked on as fundraisers for the Queer Relief Fund, to help the Queer Relief Fund. We didn't only work in the scope of Beirut, we also worked on a scope that is a bit international, in Europe, in America, in Canada, in Australia, for the people to know, so that everyone keeps talking about Beirut, and, at the same time, so that they can donate funds for us to be able to continue helping the people. Eventually, we reached a point where we had plans for six months, one year, so that the money wasn't spent immediately, so we can make sure people have an income as COVID-19 continues.

S: For me, at the beginning, the [Queer Relief] Fund was a social responsibility from our end to do something and act, given the positions we are in. But, now, we have reached a point where we're developing [it] into a nongovernmental organization (NGO) because we noticed that there's a huge need. We reached a point where there is a never-ending demand for these types of support within the community.

Host: So, A, if you could tell me a bit, if you're comfortable talking about it, about your experiences with the Blast and this initiative, and how it has made you feel.

Andrea Najarian³: Whenever I have the opportunity to tell the story, I feel better and better because I come to terms a bit with what happened, more and more, and I am better able to accept it, and it can give people a bit more hope. So, on that day, I was at home, in Mar Mikhael.

I live next to the highway, 500 meters away from the Beirut port. My grandmother got married in this house, my mother grew up in this house, I grew up in this house, and I lived with my mother there. So, on that day, my mother was in the mountains, thank God she was not home.

It was at 6 p.m. and I was sitting on the balcony, drinking a glass of wine. I went to the toilet, as I was walking towards the toilet, the blast happened. I remember that, at this point, I thought, that's it, life was over. But when it ended, I was able to get up on my feet, but I looked to my left and right, there was no floor in the house anymore. The walls [were gone], everything was on the floor, I was barefoot at the time, and I started seeing blood everywhere. My first reflex was to run. When you're in a car accident, for example, and you get out of the car, people run to help you, to take you to the hospital. I started running, and running, and running, until I reached the street.

I started screaming, and screaming, for someone to help, but no one came to help. Everyone was too concerned with something else: themselves, their friends, or their parents. At this point, I continued walking. I kept walking and reached Mar Mikhail. This is when I saw a soldier passing by on his motorbike and I asked him to help me, and he kept going. We already had lost all hope in the government [before the Blast], but when you're seeing police officers and soldiers standing on the day of the Blast, and they are okay and they have motorbikes and they're not helping people, meanwhile, normal people are carrying each other on their backs, this is not logical nor normal. I kept walking and the cars were moving recklessly, a car even ran into me. Me and a guy climbed on it and then we continued walking, and I still didn't know what was wrong with me nor where there was blood. There was only a piece of glass on my neck, which I removed.

My back, all of it [was covered in glass], but I wasn't able to see. I didn't know. I didn't know where to go, so I continued walking. I didn't know if I would make it. When I finally arrive to Geitaoui Hospital, the hospital is destroyed, and injured patients are being evacuated. Here, I said to myself, it's time to give up. So, I sat on the floor and closed my eyes a bit. But there was a

strength [in me] that made me get up. I continued walking until I reached Hotel Dieu [Hospital]. I had never been to a hospital, only ever to visit someone else, I have never been admitted to a hospital, and I didn't have health insurance at the time. What should I do, where should I go? I asked, and someone told me to go to the Emergency Room (ER).

When I got to the ER, I was too shy to ask for help. I was shy. When you see the people in the ER at Hotel Dieu, you get shy. The nurse looked at me and said, "Come back tomorrow, we are not available today." I didn't come back the next day: I laid down on the floor right there, asking for help, but no one was helping me. My mother didn't know where I was, I didn't have my phone, my friends didn't know where I was, I was on my own.

Finally, I ran into someone I went to school with, who happened to be a doctor at Hotel Dieu. She carried me to the table and they started stapling my neck. They told me there might still be glass in my body, that I had to do an [X-ray]. They took me out of the room and they told me that my arteries on my right hand were ripped and I still had pieces of glass on my neck. They removed the glass from my neck and they put me in the corridor where, on either side of me, someone was undergoing an operation. Without anesthesia. I asked for anesthesia, because I was unable to tolerate the pain, but they told me they had run out [of anesthesia]. They told me they had to operate while I was awake. The operation took two to three hours.

L: You did the operation two to three hours without operation?

S: Yes, I have the pictures because I went to see him.

A: I didn't have my cell phone and I didn't remember anyone's number. I was losing so much blood [because] the arteries were ripped. I didn't know how I was able to stand up. So I asked my friend [the doctor] to send a message to S on Instagram. The doctor that was performing the operation started crying, because she didn't know what to do. Thankfully, S, my friend Ziad, and my family arrived. Thank God, I have a good relationship with my family, but I chose to go with S

to her house because I needed my friends around me, because they are the ones who understand me. I spent the first two weeks at S's house; I was unable to move. I had over 180 stitches.

You see here, we created the fund. While I was sitting in bed, in the room next to me, we were managing the operations.

S: And the ceiling was falling...

A: And the ceiling was falling at the same time.

S: And without glass...

A: And without glass. And I recently had an operation. There was no glass in the house, no nothing. I had to face reality: yes, this was happening. Thankfully, I was privileged enough to have these surroundings, friends and family to help me, to push me to become better, both physically and mentally.

Host: So, let's talk about the [Queer Relief] Fund. What's the fund and what does it cover? How many people are working on it?

S: Today, we have 234 cases from the LGBTQIA+ community. The goal of the fund is to provide support to the people who were affected by the Blast in different ways. We divide the cases based on priorities. The first priority was for anything related to medical [issues or costs], because even though hospitals covered initial costs, the Government did not cover any of the follow-up treatment costs or operations. The second priority was housing repairs. We had a team of volunteer engineers and architects go and assess houses for damage.

L: These people were all from the community [because] we were trying to show the extent of the queer presence on the ground...

S: And the extent to which these skills exist within the community itself, that we can use.

A: While raising awareness all at the same time.

S: For people who lost everything, we covered their rent for a year. We also covered relocation rent for three to four months until the houses were repaired, and for people whose houses could be fixed immediately, we helped with rent, depending on the employment status [of the household members]. It was a case-by-case assessment. We were also distributing around approximately 400 hot meals per day during the first month [after the Blast].

L: Subsistence [materials].

S: Everything: food boxes, hygiene boxes, masks, tampons, condoms, furniture, refrigerators...We were working with Embrace [to provide mental health support], and then we started sending [people] to certain therapists [for support].

But, we reached a point that, even though the aim of the Fund was, from the beginning, to support the queer community, we could not only help the queer community without including other marginalized communities. So, we started helping other communities. We did not want to marginalize other communities...

L: Just because they didn't belong to our community.

Host: So how have you been able to extend your presence beyond the queer community?

S: A lot of [outreach] has been achieved through word-of-mouth.

L: There are also around fifty volunteers helping with the Queer Relief Fund, and we exceeded 50 at some point. We are people who have been on the ground for a long time, although we never

considered ourselves activists or something. We are people from the community who are present. All people, most of the people, I won't say all because there is no such a thing, most people trust what we do and trust us when we're talking about something. So, when there was this initiative, people knew us and trusted us to carry this out.

We are known within the queer community, and people trust us. When something like this happens, people expected us to react...

S: It was an expected move from us.

A: Because we do not miss a chance to show how proud we are of who we are, of what we do, and our work. When conditions worsened, we stepped up, in both happy and difficult times.

L: We also stepped up because we don't have anyone but each other. The government pays [the queer community] no attention, and it won't pay us any attention any time soon unless it wants to marginalize us even further. So, if we don't stand by each other, honestly...

S: Even NGOs specialized in this domain [e.g. work within queer communities], you feel like a second-class citizen when you go there. I know of a lot of cases where people went to seek help [from these NGOs], and because [the NGOs] are not a member of this community, they felt like a secondary concern.

Host: So what next? What now?

S: The goal is to turn [the Fund] into a structuralized NGO [that] can offer a safety net for queer people. For me, [the] Queer Relief Fund has to be turned into an umbrella that provides a safety net, whether emotional, psychological, mental, financial, all of it [for all in need]. This is what's needed because this is something that's missing, we don't have it from the government.

L: At the same time, as an NGO or whatever institution [the Fund] is, it should also put pressure on the government to be able to change certain things in the current system.

S: Or put pressure on existing institutions.

L: Yes, to change the thing we're living [in], to change the skeleton of the government, because our end goal is for all people to be living comfortably and happily.

S: Yes, for me, as long as there is a need for these NGOs, that means there's a loack from the government.

L: Yes, that's true.

A: This was also the case before the Blast. There were a lot of people before the Blast whose conditions were really bad, which worsened after the Blast. We are able to communicate with our families and we don't have this issue of homophobia with our families, but there are people who come from scary backgrounds. After the explosion, they were more affected by it. So, it is very important to have the [Queer Relief] Fund, especially for such people.

L: In the end, the goal of everything we're doing is not for someone to come and thank us or to show people what we're doing. If we're talking this much about what we're doing, it is for people to hear about us for those who need it to come and ask for it, not to be shy or be afraid. The greater goal is the idea that people who will come after us not to be forced to live everything we've lived so far and everything we're trying to fight against and for. I don't care about doing something that serves me personally or for people to think highly of me, I care about the boy who was happy with the idea that there is safe space, this is something I haven't experienced and I hope to see future generations are living better lives than the ones we lived, because this gives us at least some hope for the future that maybe the situation would get better. The entire planet is heading towards destruction. At least, in the work that we're doing, we're trying to, if

we're heading towards collapse, let us be at least happy while we're at it, for the collapse not to be coming from us.

S: We're at a point that we're trying to provide basic life needs, basic life needs for human dignity. For someone to have a place to live in, to be able to eat, and at least to have access to proper hygiene, physical health...The basic ones. For 10 years, we have been working on awareness and visibility, [and] you feel like, in one day, all of this has no meaning, and we're focusing on how to eat and live. For me, I think what happened in the explosion was that yes, for 10 years, as members of the LGBTQ+ community, we've been working on awareness and visibility for the community and cultural history in the Middle East, because we still don't have proper LGBTQ+ cultural history here. You feel like everything here is still taken from the west. So, we were trying all of these years to take from the west but excel at it in an Arab way to create a queer past for us. You feel like, in one day, it's gone. Everything is vanished and we returned to the instinct that we should eat, drink, and sleep, and everything else is now irrelevant. For me, we went 30 steps backwards in an instant.

L: To create a past and present for us. Because, what's ugly about the explosion is the idea that it united the people, but at the same time, it showed all the discrimination that's happening from the government. It showed that the marginalized groups are really marginalized groups. If they don't work in solidarity, no one will look at them. It showed that people can unite, they don't need the government. It showed that everything, like capitalism, that we are living in an old system that can be changed and should be changed. It should be changed now if we want to really continue properly for the future. What we lived is very ugly, but it's not uglier than what we were able to understand after it, because there are a lot of things that need to be changed, and it needs to be changed now, or else no one will be comfortable.

A: We should all stay [here] in the country, because here, we can affect change. Personally, after the explosion, I started loving Beirut even more than I used to love it. I started appreciating it more than I used to appreciate it before. I don't think I am even capable of leaving. Even if I had

another chance, I don't think I will be able to abandon my country because I was this close to losing it and losing myself. So, I don't think I'm afraid of anything anymore in these times.

L: [We have] a sense of responsibility. We didn't leave because we know we can create change. This is when we understood our strength and that society needs us now.

The full podcast episode can be found on the Shabaket El Meem website:
www.shabaketelmeem.com.

Notes

¹ Lary BS is a comedian, actor, impact producer, and stylist for film and television.

² Sandra Melhem is the founder and manager of Queer Relief Fund.

³ Andrea Najarian is a freelance artist.