

Connecting diverse populations through art education

Creating an environment in Acre where people flourish

• By BARBARA BAMBERGER

The city of Acre recently celebrated the opening of the Akko Center for Arts and Technology (A-CAT), the first affiliated center of Manchester Bidwell Corporation (MBC) to be established outside the United States. MBC is an American NGO offering art education and career training to at-risk youth and adults “in transition” – going through job changes or reentering the workplace after a break. In Acre the goal is even wider: to facilitate connections among Acre’s diverse, and sometimes divided, population.

MBC was founded on the belief that art education can enrich and empower the disadvantaged. This was the personal experience of MBC president and CEO Bill Strickland, who grew up in a poor neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He describes himself as “disengaged” until his high-school art teacher introduced him to pottery and changed his life.

Strickland was accepted to university on probation, became an airline pilot, opened a pottery studio for neighborhood kids while still a student, and proceeded to grow his original studio into nine centers around the US, serving thousands of teens and adults.

Each center reflects the needs of a specific community. Offerings have expanded to include training in pharmacy technology, medical coding, food services, horticulture and more.

The Acre location adds a whole new dimension to the organization’s core vision. Acre’s 55,000 residents are made up of 72% Jews and 28% Arabs. The goal of A-CAT is not only to provide vocational opportunities in a city located in Israel’s social and economic periphery, but to “bridge the divide among Jews and Arabs through art, environment, career training and collaboration.”

The person who made the connection between MBC and Acre is lawyer Mark Frank, born and raised in Pittsburgh. He first came to Israel in 1996 for his daughter’s bat mitzva and has known Strickland since the early days. While still in law school, Strickland hired him to represent those students who were in trouble with the law. Frank now works in a private firm, but he’ll never forget the beginning. “The very first day after I passed the bar exam I got a phone call from Bill, ‘Get down here. I need you.’ Today I’m a ‘Friend of the Organization.’ It’s in my DNA.”

“Environment is transformative. Our aspirations are more important than our differences. I wanted to take that idea to Israel. Bill thought I was out of my mind,” Frank says. “Acre really embraced us. Now Acre is my second home. It’s the ‘mixed city’ aspect – it’s on the sea; it’s a fascinating and historic place. This is rich soil for this type of program.”

A-CAT currently rents space in Acre’s industrial area. Since way back, when Strickland noticed that buildings for “rich people” have fountains, there has been one in every MBC center. In Acre, a gorgeous, floor-to-ceiling waterfall faces the entrance. “This is about making a place for our students,” explains Frank. “We’re telling them ‘You deserve this.’” The stunning interior was designed by Italian architect Michele Simeone.

Much of the initial funding came from private donors. “Before, my job was to get the center going. Now my job is to sustain it,” Frank says. “The goal is to get as much local funding as possible. I’d like it to be an Israeli program.”

Acre city manager Ohad Segev, together with Mayor Shimon Lankri, immediately recognized the value of Frank’s proposal. “The municipality promotes the project with our blessings because of the two goals: to encourage weak populations and to promote connections between Jews and Arabs,” says Segev. He believes that Acre provides “the very best platform for this program. We have social difficulties, economic difficulties, but there’s no other mixed city in Israel where the relationships between Jews and Arabs are so good, and there’s almost no other city where the residents, as a community, are treated as an asset. And this is before A-CAT. A-CAT is an addition of power.”



Art and games: A 3D printed chess set at A-CAT. (Photos: Barbara Bamberger)

About future funding Segev says, “The minute the correct programs are in place and it’s proven they work, then you can start raising money from government institutions. That’s how it works: through philanthropic donors and the government offices that deal with these programs.”

A-CAT CEO Naim Obeid is a Christian and an Acre native. He had his own business as a sound engineer for almost 30 years. “I met Bill Strickland, asked a lot of questions, and was very impressed by the project,” he says. “I became a board member and when I was offered the position as CEO I decided to take it, though it meant leaving my business.

“It’s working well – with all the challenges,” says Obeid. “No program opens that doesn’t have 50% Arabs and 50% Jews. No one should be a minority. They wouldn’t feel comfortable, especially the young people. Sometimes this is the first opportunity for them to be in the same room with each other. Here, they respect the other, even with the differences. This is an important life skill and we can see it happen.

In their first class the students split themselves into two sides. In the third class you already feel a change, and by the fourth class they’re open to talking. They share phone numbers and form WhatsApp groups.”

COO Jane Cynkus is Jewish, grew up in South Africa and has lived and worked in the



Left: A-CAT COO Jane Cynkus (left) and 3D printing lab manager/youth program coordinator Sogood Zeini at the opening.

At the ribbon cutting: (from left) Acre Chief Rabbi Yosef Yashar, lawyer Mark Frank, MBC president and CEO Bill Strickland, A-CAT CEO Naim Obeid and Acre Mayor Shimon Lankri. (Oshri Cohen)



The auditorium, complete with an inspirational message.

area for many years. "A-CAT is something special. It's opened up a world I wasn't familiar with," says Cynkus, who invites the public to come visit. "We're a small team, very budget-oriented. Each of us does our own task and more."

"We have 28 adult students – half Jews, half Arabs – in the tourism and hospitality course, done in conjunction with Raya Strauss's 'Treasures of the Galilee' initiative and the University of Haifa's Israel School of Tourism," she explains. Classes meet in the evenings and include lectures and excursions.

"We're the shell that facilitates the potential for people to enter the workforce and to open small businesses." The training people receive here will enhance the Galilee's already strong tourism economy.

"In July we're opening a course in industrial quality control with Erez College in Shlomi. We'll have 15 to 20 students. Some are workplace referrals," says Cynkus. The center also plans to help with job-hunting.

Students aged 14 to 18 choose between 3D printing and photography. Equipment is state-of-the-art. 3D printing lab manager Sogood Zeini, an observant Muslim, is also youth program coordinator. She studied industrial engineering and management at the Technion, worked in logistics, and knew almost nothing about 3D printing when she started.

"I learned a lot from the suppliers and I watched a lot of YouTube," she says. But course content goes way beyond the technical. Jewish and Arab students are encouraged and, when necessary, pushed into interacting with each other.

"On a typical day, the kids arrive and eat a sandwich in the auditorium – Jews and Arabs at the same tables. They come into the classroom where we cover theoretical material and the task. Then they sketch on a piece of paper. From that they use a modeling program to make a computer sketch. This gets sent to the printer which "prints" in layers," says Zeini.

"During class, we insert social activities. Printing is just a way to reach the goal. The goal is for Jews and Arabs to sit together, for kids to learn to use their time wisely, to work in groups, to create something, and to receive positive feedback."

Each course consists of 12 two-hour sessions and each class is taught in both Hebrew and Arabic. Fluent in both languages, Zeini teaches with a Jewish assistant. "What is important is that when I speak in Hebrew, everyone listens. When I speak in Arabic, everyone listens."

In May, the first graduation ceremony took place with 57 young alumni. Some 120 teenagers are currently enrolled in the second round. "We don't always notice the significance of what we're doing here because we see it every day," says Zeini. "But I know we're doing something. I get calls all the time from students asking to volunteer here."

According to Segev, A-CAT will be a flagship project for the State of Israel. "Every city has vulnerable residents and Israel is a mixed country," he says. "We need to live together, to respect each other, to know one another – and to not be afraid. In the end, we have no other alternative. So, for that, it's always good to be the pioneer."

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