What hope looks like to one Palestinian

Akram al-Waara sits in a refugee camp and makes art—out of tear gas canisters.

by Melissa Florer-Bixler in the November 2022 issue

(Illustration by Federico Gastaldi)

Akram al-Waara sits at a table surrounded by curling slivers of metal and hunks of olive wood. Other tables hold hills of sawdust and the remnants of jigsaw blades. I find him among the chaos, creating art from gas canisters the Israel Defense Forces shot over the separation wall that gashes across the little town of Bethlehem.

“You think of me as an artist?” he asks, as my eye turns across the room, taking in resin bowls, meticulously crafted jewelry, and an ornate metal sculpture of Jerusalem. “Many people think I’m crazy or stupid,” he says with a smile.

Akram was born in Aida, back when the refugee camp in Bethlehem was made up of canvas tents, before it became a permanent settlement of cinder-block buildings and tight alleyways. Today Aida’s scrap of land, less than a third of a square mile, is home to around 5,000 Palestinians who are refugees in their own land.

Akram was one of Aida's first residents, after being forced to leave the West Bank village where his people lived for generations. His family's home was destroyed by Israeli soldiers as part of what Palestinians call the Nakba—the disaster. Between 1947 and 1949, more than 700,000 Palestinians were displaced from their land.

As a young man, Akram left the West Bank to work as an electrical engineer in Iraq. US-led war forced him back, but it was the separation wall that led him toward a life creating beauty from ruin. Its construction hemmed Bethlehem in, and soon an illegal Israeli settlement loomed above the camp. It became difficult to continue working in Israel.

Instead, Akram took a local job fixing computers. When he began to notice jewelry in the tourist shops around town, he wondered, *Why don't I do that?* He started creating jewelry out of forks and spoons.

The idea to shift toward using tear gas canisters came after an especially difficult couple months of bombardment by the IDF. Over tea, Akram tells me stories of rushing his children to a windowless room in the house, their nights interrupted over and over as tear gas filled the camp. He was angry and afraid.

He tells me of a 2017 study that declared Aida the most tear-gassed place in the world. Each morning the ground was littered with bright, silver tear gas canisters, often expired. The canisters have destroyed classrooms, poisoned gardens, and suffocated Palestinians. The long-term impact of the poisonous gas and violent incursions on Palestinian children—both physical and psychological—is catastrophic.

One morning, as Akram walked among the silver canisters, he wondered if he could make something from the thin metal.

His first attempts at preparing the canisters for reuse were a disaster, he tells me. For months his hands peeled with boils from chemical burns. He lost his voice inhaling the fumes. The first canister he opened left his family running from the house as gas seeped from the tin.

Eventually, with the help of a United Nations worker, he learned how to safely open and clean the cans. First, they sit for ten days in soap and water. Akram shows me how he then opens the canisters before running the pieces he cuts through a machine, thinning the metal until it can be cut, molded, and shaped.

Akram’s art-filled shop sits just beyond Aida’s main gate. A massive key serves as the gate’s arch. On the wall of Akram’s workshop hangs a similar key—rusted, thick, and ornate. It is the key to the home his parents were forced to leave on the farm where they grew wheat. “They destroyed everything,” he tells me of the Israeli military operation.

The door Akram’s key opens is gone, part of the rubble beneath a paved road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. But keys like this find their way into Akram’s art over and over again. “We never give up,” he tells me multiple times in the hours we talk. “We never give up.”

With my spoon filled with the apricot jam Akram’s wife is canning in the kitchen, in the cool concrete of the home he built for his family, block by block, I am reckoning with this thing called hope. Here, in Aida, in the midst of tear gas and trauma, hope is meaty. It tastes like olives and it smells like wheat. “We have on this land all of that which makes life worth living,” wrote Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. Akram scrawls these words on a T-shirt.

Back in his shop, I hold each of the objects Akram displays for visitors. Akram and his sons collected the munitions shot into Aida. A rubber bullet sliced in half to reveal the thick metal slab at its core. A heavy tear gas canister in the shape of a black light bulb. A silver canister that proclaims, “Made in the USA.”

What is hope when it rains tear gas in the day, when you rush your children away from bullets at the window in the night? What is hope in the midst of humiliation, repression, and violence?

“We teach our children about return, that we have a right to our land,” Akram tells me. For now, “I change the subject from violence to love and to peace.”

Hope is a key waiting for the door that is not yet built. Hope is the taste of jam from a tree that will be planted by a grandchild. Hope is using the rubble of occupation to tell a story of survival.

Before I leave, I ask Akram about his favorite piece of art in the collection. One last time he smiles. “Each time I say, ‘This is my favorite.’” And then he makes another.