



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Cottonera shines

From all the jobs I've had over these last 30 years or so, my time spent at Fortini Boys' Secondary School in Vittoriosa teaching PSD and serving as a guidance teacher were probably amongst the most special.

must have spent five or six scholastic years there making my time extraordinary for so many reasons. When asked during my interview which school I would be interested in working at, I made it very clear that teaching at Cottonera would be a dream. The fascinating culture, the sense of community, the distinctiveness of the colours, the smells, the sounds, the geography, the heritage were like a tapestry. If seen in isolation it might look all very confusing but all together it emitted a distinct experience, unique and special. The socio-political shrewdness and infatuation made it even more mesmerising.

The students were absolutely fantastic, well not all were easy going, like in every other school, but all-in-all they brought with them characteristics that were unique and inimitable. These students managed to bring out the best in me as an educator. They got easily bored, wanted to be engaged and were keen on experiential learning – so my teaching methods had to be up-to-date, fun, innovative and entertaining. Intrinsically these children, their parents and relatives wanted to create a conversation with the school and thankfully we managed to have that. The time spent in that school was a non-stop learning curve. Not having been brought up in that region made me appreciate the wealth and beauty of this region.

But for this community life is not a bed of roses.

People in this region have struggled incessantly with the stigma and the negative perceptions thrown at them by the rest of the country. They are questioned and warranted about everything they do. Whenever people spoke about Cottonera it was as if we were describing a conflagration, a firestorm, our own version of the Bronx in the US. My head is not buried in the sand and I do appreciate that there are negatives in this community. However, I am a strong believer that there is a 'North' and a 'South' in every town or village in Malta and Gozo and the negative political and social attention attributed to this region has not helped.

To this effect, recently I caught up with my colleague Dr JosAnn Cutajar, the Director of the Cottonera Resource Centre (CRC), an interesting initiative set up by the University of Malta just three years or so ago. The description you would find on the University Webpage states:

The University of Malta Cottonera Resource Centre was set



up to act as a bridge between the communities in the inner harbour area and the University of Malta. It seeks to act as a hub that co-ordinates links between these communities and the University, facilitating resource-transfer and capacity building.

JosAnn was given the task of managing this centre.

This tangible example of democratisation of knowledge is a fabulous initiative that the University has taken on. It wasn't intended to be an outpost for missionaries but an opportunity, one of the few, to link academia with this region. It is interesting that JosAnn had her own personal experiences and struggles which have been priceless when taking on this role.

JosAnn was born in Malta but at four years of age moved to Gozo (her parents are Gozitan). She said that she had an integral need in her to respond to the unfairness in society: "I wanted to bring change," she claimed. As she grew she experienced rejection and dismissal from her peers both because she lived in Gozo and more so because of her gender. Because of this, she developed an interest to study and research inequality but also to try and counteract it. When still young, a lot of pressure was directed towards her not to study as at the time, the mentality was for women especially in Gozo, to remain at home. She told me, "I was the first Gozitan woman that left Gozo to pursue my studies abroad and to return. She said that until then only Gozitan

women who had emigrated and were living abroad went on to study. JosAnn continued saying that she knows what being pushed aside means. At school she would be called names and insulted because she lived in Gozo and some children even went as far as to hesitate when sharing play time. Even her family discouraged her from speaking up, because they felt that they came from a lower social strata and so keeping back was the thing they expected her to do. It was early on in her life that she realised what it meant to be excluded and ostracised and what inequality tasted like. JosAnn claims that seeing and experiencing so much unfairness made her increasingly angry. For example, she just couldn't fathom that girls were not encouraged to benefit from the educational system but were expected to 'remain at home'. She claimed that girls had to struggle even to play sports when at sixth form. All of this contributed to her developing a strong sense of social justice. She wanted her commitment in academia not to rest on desktop research but to help kick-up the system, fight exploitation and react to stigma. For JosAnn responding to discrimination was imperative. She says that: "I didn't want people to suffer like I did." JosAnn went on to become the first president of the Gozo students' organisation even though that meant she had to overcome 'timidity'.

Her rapport with the Cottonera region developed when she

got married. She still lives there to this day and considers this community as having similar exclusionary experiences she had when still living in Gozo.

JosAnn felt increasingly comfortable working and living in this region because she could generalise the challenges she experienced in Gozo. Her blend of interests, ranging from cultural studies to sociology, from women's rights to social inclusion, from community development to social justice are interests that found fruition at the Cottonera Resource Centre, which is working hard at popularising education. This centre has offered revision classes, organised public lectures, partnered up with the Italian film festival and promoted science education amongst other. CRC also provides a legal clinic in collaboration with the Faculty of Laws. JosAnn insists that we need to keep investing in this community with initiatives like *Leap*. She maintains that the recent community regeneration is serving this community well.

It is crucial that the people of Cottonera are allowed to retain control over their communities. They don't need hand-holding – they are the ones who know what is best for them. It is a community growing in stature. The heritage, the topography and the natural features characteristic of this region need to be valued, esteemed and celebrated – CRC is another loop in making Cottonera shine.

If interested in the work of the CRC contact: 2340-7801

Ghandi xi Nghid

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