

ACT NOW YOUTH NETWORK

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LOCATE VICTIMS BEIRUT: THE YOUTH-LED INITIATIVE THAT SAVED LIVES



Zahraa Issa describes herself as an aspiring change-maker for displaced people. Her current work revolves around abolition and advocacy for social justice. In August 2020, she founded the only emergency response platform designed to physically locate victims of the tragic Beirut Blast with the goal to assist families and friends in locating missing loved ones. Originally created on Instagram, the Locate Victims Beirut handle quickly reached 100,000 followers. But Issa was not the only one to have this idea. Many young people, among which many were teenagers, reached out to support the initiative. Emma Sleiman, an aspiring change-maker but also a healthcare activist currently leading her own grassroots organisation called **Beiyouth** joined Issa as she saw the need for a single platform to collect as much verified information as possible on those who had gone missing.

This is how the website **Locate Victims Beirut** was born. As part of this effort, fundraisers were set-up, which covered food distribution, reconstruction work as well as medical aid for a large number of families living in vulnerable communities affected by the blast. Issa was twenty at the

In this interview, the two ACT NOW Youth Network members open up about the learnings of their project and about ways young people can step up and bring significant change in their communities.

Your project Locate Victims Beirut has achieved remarkable impact and relief on a global scale. How did you come together in this initiative and how did you carry the process forward?

Zahraa Issa: On the day of the Beirut Blast on August 4th, pictures of missing people were flooding social media. Efforts to identify victims were being compromised by a complete lack of coordination and organisation which the government at the time was completely removed from.

I thought to myself, even if I recognized a given person, there was no way I could remember the account it was attributed to later on. I thought it would be much more efficient to centralize everything on one single platform, which is why I created Locate Victims Beirut. The effort essentially consisted in posting a picture of a given missing person and have the general public share any information they had about that person in the comment section. Whether because they saw their names in hospital lists, heard them on the news or saw and recognised them personally. We identified many individuals in this way, and even followed up with/provided support to one of them. After two days that had me and my seven friends working 24/7 to accommodate the demand, Emma reached out to me with the amazing idea of creating a website. By that point, the account had already reached 100K followers and received the verified blue check which helped with credibility. The website, which was set up by an amazing team of young people, made the process of identifying victims faster and more effective, though by that point most missing persons had already been located. We also teamed up with computer scientist Mowafak Allaham, who built an integrated database that now serves as an archive widely used by news outlets and other entities. Locate Victims Beirut is very much the fruit of pure teamwork. From its conception to what it came to be several months after the blast.

Emma Sleiman: On the day of the blasts, I was watching the news. Mentally, I wasn't here. My family was safe – thanks gods, my dad was 30 minutes of being next to the port. So, you know, the anecdote was so so mind-blowing. But the fact that we were to be in their places – right now I have goosebumps just thinking about the process. But basically, what happened that day is that I saw the news and a reporter was asking the Minister of Health whether or not she will be publishing a database of those who were missing after the blast to help families locate their beloved ones. And so, I don't remember what the Minister of Health said but then, I just grabbed my computer and began searching through website builders. I tried to do as much as I could to wrap it up quickly and so when I woke up the next day, I asked my friends to send me the pictures

so, we had a team, I called up my friends and I said "Ok, so I need you to help me with this. I need you to help me in doing that, that, that." And we had a team. Two days after the blast we reached out to Locate Victims Beirut and to Zahraa. We saw that an Insta-page was doing the same thing as we were doing with the website but was doing it on Insta. And so, we said to ourselves: why not collaborate? And this is where everything happened. I just remember the meeting; I was sitting there and we were talking about the eventuality of having LocateVictimsBeirut.com. Before my website was like "missinginBeirut.myside" or ".com". And then we kind of wrapped up everything and, believe it or not, we had a very well-designed site in one night. This is how urgent the situation was. So, I think this is how Locate Victims Beirut began.

What are some of the things you achieved by creating the Locate Victims Beirut Instagram account?

Zahraa Issa: The audience and attention which Locate Victims Beirut received on Instagram was so significant that I felt it had to be put to good use long after the blast. I was however unsure as to how I would do that, as the account in itself and its content was a bit morbid and scarring for people to want to follow up/engage with. We ended up going on the streets of Beirut and interviewing people whose stories would be posted for support. We reconnected with Eleni, a victim of the blast whose whereabouts had been identified through our platform. We fundraised for her, as well as for the many other families/individuals we had met, which were in great need. As mentioned in earlier responses, the funds raised generally ended up covering food distribution, reconstruction work as well as medical aid for a large number of families living in vulnerable communities affected by the blast.

After months of doing this work, we decided that Locate Victims Beirut's Instagram page would stay an emergency response platform and only be used if the need were to arise again. Although we hope to never have to use it again in such circumstances, we do think it's necessary that we have such a tool at our disposal. Firstly because of the vast audience the platform has racked up and the effectiveness of our team's response, but more importantly because relying on the Lebanese government is not an option for us anymore.

What were the significant hurdles, experiences and surprises that you have experienced along the way?

Zahraa Issa: The Locate Victims Beirut team was composed of young adults as well as teenagers, for the most part. As a result of this, many team members struggled with being taken seriously when contacting governmental agencies for cooperation or increased transparency.

Other hurdles also came up when fundraising for example, as we had to appeal to a grieving audience already flooded with information and heartbreaking stories.

The biggest surprise, at least for me, has to be the impact this whole project (which initially went from nothing) had. What started as creating a simple Instagram page ended in huge relief to a fragilized community.

Emma Sleiman: I think that just realizing that we don't need to have a PhD, a professor to do this and that we can definitely do this as young people. And that team, we were between 15 and I guess 22 years old. The oldest one was 22 years old. And just saying that is really powerful for us young people. To see that we have done the government's job at some points and the experience itself it was empowering.

And what lessons have you integrated?

Zahraa Issa: This project has made me realize the importance and the benefits of change at the individual level. In this day and age, it is small scale initiatives that are making the most difference. 2020 alone has shown us how grassroots movements have built momentum.

Activists for the black lives matter movement like Shaun King or ones working to expose the Uyghurs genocide like Raphael Glucksmann have mobilized hundreds of thousands of people have worked around the clock to build momentum. To get police officers fired, to get budget reallocation, to get leaders to break their silence. This project has truly made me realize that it all starts with us, at our own individual level. With our initiatives, with our raising of awareness, with our phone calls, with our emails, with our protests, with our willingness to hold to account and simply make a difference.

How can we use social media to enable societal change?

Zahraa Issa: Social media has been the medium through which I have developed every single one of my initiatives- no exception. It is a great way to educate the general public (cf. the rise of infographics on Instagram) and more importantly allow them to process information at their own pace. I struggle with anxiety a lot so this aspect of it is something I really appreciate.

To answer the question of how it can enable societal change though, one only needs to take a look at the past year. The Black Lives Matter movement massively organised in the summer of last year and secured enormous wins as a result. All, during a global pandemic. It goes without

have resulted in concrete change. These led to millions of diverted tax dollars being heavily invested in community rehabilitation.

For example, Austin City Council approved in early February of this year, the purchase of a hotel to permanently house people experiencing chronic homelessness, using millions of dollars cut from its police budget. The same is happening in many other cities with Seattle also using millions in diverted funds for public health and safety. Again, these are massive and concrete wins in the midst of a pandemic. They stemmed from a movement that was massively organic online (as well as offline with protests etc).

In short, social media is an important tool for organising, and can be used to raise awareness beyond US borders in this case. It can be used to exert pressure on authorities and shift narratives which have been embedded in the collective psyche for as long as we can remember.

This will in turn, invite action and force change.

How would you advise other people on using digital tools and websites and media to become more involved and active in the future of their municipalities. And how can we make young people more interested in politics in a positive way?

Emma Sleiman: I would suggest the Model United Nations. It's a programme that we have in different universities and so Model United Nations gives us information about the UN. And I would say something, the UN is a very powerful institution to go with. So, for people who want to use websites to influence their municipality, I would first go and research what the UN has done and understand how they work, because implementing the strategy of work to your actual initiative is very important, having that mentality.

Make sure that in your municipality, you go there and ask what are the initiatives that are being deployed, that are there helping you. Once you have found your purpose, go to the municipality – let's say for me its healthcare – ask them, okay, what are the initiatives that have helped you in this. Reach out to many institutions via E-Mail – you can check LinkedIn for that. It's very important for you to ask for advice from institutions that have done this before. And a lot of people actually reply. Ask them for advice, for resources, like this interview, just something for you to know more about that topic. And go there, have your idea ready, make sure that you have an assessment of what is happening in the municipality before you start your own initiative.

We all want to change the world, but you need to have an actual plan to change the world.



HOW FRIENDSHIP CAN STRENGTHEN YOUTH ACTIVISM

Edoardo Caroli and Ilario Salvemini are the founders of Turbe Giovanili (Youth Turmoil), a project created by young people for young people with a passion for politics.



HOW YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BE CHANGEMAKERS

With the ACT NOW Youth Network, The Innovation in Politics Institute is creating a platform for empowering young people to be changemakers in their communities.

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