

Fatima Dar Odeh - Story

Fatima Dar Odeh lives in Dahaysha, a UN refugee camp in Bethlehem, with her husband, two sons, and daughter. Growing up, Fatima loved helping those around her. Several people suggested that her empathetic skills would serve well in the medical field, and she decided to become a nurse.

Fatima has spent her entire career as part of the Holy Family Hospital nursing staff and has been at the Hospital since it was reopened by the Order of Malta in 1990 as a maternity and neonatal critical care center. Committed staff members like Fatima indicate just how seriously the hospital takes its commitment to serving anyone who walks through its doors, without regard to ethnicity, financial need, or creed.

When Fatima began her nursing career, she was placed in the postnatal department and loved caring for recovering mothers and their brand-new bundles of joy. She remained in that department for over 11 years. In 2001, staff changes at the hospital lead to Fatima being transferred to the operating department. She was excited for the new, faster paced work environment.

“I had no problem transferring because I love to learn new things and got used to it easily. The operating room nursing supervisor helped me a lot. Both postnatal and operating nursing work is demanding, but I fit even better in the operating room,” she said.

While Fatima was adjusting to her new position as an operating nurse, there was great civil unrest in the Bethlehem region. Curfews and limitations were imposed upon everyone living in the area. During this time, Fatima was pregnant with her son. The civil discord grew more and more intense and she feared for the safety of her unborn child. The staff at the Holy Family Hospital embraced Fatima and assured her that no harm would come to her or her unborn child.

“Sister Sophie, a sister of St. Vincent de Paul, was the Head of Nursing at the time and was so sympathetic to all of us who were worried. She helped me overcome my fears. I am a strong woman who was raised in a refugee camp and curfews cannot make me afraid.”

Strong refugee women like Fatima make up 45% of the patient population at Holy Family Hospital. The Hospital employs refugees from nearby camps, including Fatima, which in turn helps refugee families who come for medical care to feel at ease and at home. Because Fatima is a refugee, when other refugees come to Holy Family Hospital, she is easily able to be attentive to their needs and put them at ease, and they are much more trusting of her. Employees like Fatima are essential to ensuring that refugees receive the healthcare that they need with dignity.

The current situation has resulted in extreme hardship for families in Bethlehem. The dire economic situation in the region limits access to medical care, resulting in urgent public health

issues that are worsened by road closures, curfews, and security checkpoints. Many of these issues disproportionately impact women and children.

Holy Family Hospital is a primary work of the Order of Malta. The Holy Family Hospital of Bethlehem Foundation was established in 2000 by the three Associations of the Order of Malta in the United States to support Holy Family Hospital which is 1,500 steps from the birthplace of Christ. Founded by the Daughters of Charity in 1885 and sustained by the Sovereign Order of Malta since 1990 at the request of Saint John Paul II, Holy Family Hospital provides the only available medical care for high-risk pregnancies in the Bethlehem region. As the second largest employer in Bethlehem, the hospital employs over 172 Palestinians.

Holy Family Hospital has delivered over 85,000 babies since it reopened its doors in 1990, including over 4,700 babies in 2019 alone. Since its opening, the hospital began additional programs in order to meet the needs of the growing population of the Bethlehem region. The Mobile Clinic goes out daily to care for the medical needs of women and children refugees and residents of remote desert communities. It offers obstetric, gynecological, and pediatric care all from a mobile van. Additionally, the creation of the Well Woman Clinic in 2013 was the first of its kind to meet the needs of women past childbearing age and provide treatment for diabetes. The neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) has 18 beds that are always full caring for over 450 infants in 2019. Holy Family Hospital in Bethlehem currently is the only NICU in the region capable of caring for babies born before 32 weeks. Holy Family Hospital in Bethlehem is committed to bringing life, peace, and hope to the Holy Land, and is achieved through the efforts of nurses like Fatima Dar Odeh.