

# On the road to self-discovery (/joomla-news/highlights/8444-on-the-road-to-self-discovery)

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Sharifah (wearing hijab) in Nablus, making a birthday card for Majde (first from left) using art supplies like construction paper, glue and glitter from Singapore

During the term break this year, Sharifah Nabilah Syed Omar found herself on a nerve-racking taxi ride heading to the border between Jordan and the Palestinian West Bank. The Year 3 Sociology student had signed up to volunteer with a non-profit organisation in the West Bank city of Nablus but could not reach the organisation on the phone because the number she had was incorrect. Armed with courage and an address, Sharifah braved the border patrol, determined to connect with her Middle-Eastern roots and take another step in her journey of self-discovery. She finally reached Nablus, but not without some trepidation.

“It was quite scary. I just said, go for it, take the risk,” she recalled.

Her trip to the West Bank was partially funded by the Tan Mingwei Global Community Service Grant, which is administered by NUS’ International Relations Office. It is awarded to students who carry out community service or internships with community service providers in developing countries.

The bus ride in Jordan was not the first time the earnest young woman had ventured into this conflict-ridden region on her own. A year before, she had volunteered with global youth organisation AIESEC, in Cairo, Egypt.

Sharifah started volunteering because of remarks made about her not being able to relate to the less fortunate as she had not endured much hardship in her life. She had intentionally sought out volunteering stints in the Middle East because her father’s family originated from Yemen.

While in Nablus, she taught English to primary school children as well as university students, and also participated in football training with girls from a refugee camp. In Cairo, she had worked with volunteers from around the world to come up with ad-hoc projects to improve poor neighbourhoods. Her altruistic endeavours, however, first started in Singapore when she tutored her neighbours and helped out youths through the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP).



Sharifah (second row, far left) played football with girls from a Nablus refugee camp

“When I’m teaching at AMP, I meet people whose lives are a world away from mine. It makes me aware of how privileged I am and how I need to learn about and understand them.”

Each sojourn provided an opportunity for the Sociology major to practice her Arabic, and has also brought to life the theories she had only read about.

Sharifah, who is of Arabic, Chinese and Malay descent, experienced first-hand a concept she had studied in a Sociology module.

“We learnt that race is a fluid concept, it’s not biological. I felt like me being part Arab, Malay, Chinese...my identity is fluid as well, and some people didn’t know where I was from,” she explained.

At times, the Palestinians had mistaken her for a Chinese, which she said would never happen in Singapore as she wears a hijab. And yet, she felt that the Arabs would not accept that she was Arabic, if she had told them so.

“My trips abroad have given me an intimate experience of what I’ve learnt in the classroom.”

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