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WALKING WITH PURPOSE

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A LITTLE BIT OF MAGIC!

MAGIC FOR Smiles

JAMIE JIBBERISH

Jamie Balfour-Paul is a magician! Not just an ordinary one: he is the only humanitarian magician based and working in Lebanon.

Born in Beirut, the son of a British diplomat, Jamie attended boarding school in Britain beginning at the age of 8. Since childhood he has been fascinated by magic and as a young teen spent hours learning how to perform simple tricks from a magic kit. "It was possibly a desire to be different, or due to a feeling of insecurity, that I wanted to have the power to hold secrets!" he says.

Later, his time at British universities developed his thirst for social justice and the empowerment of ordinary people. A professional career took him to countries in the Horn of Africa, East Africa and the Middle East working at OXFAM, CARE and Crisis Action. His work as a policy advisor and director allowed him to advocate for human rights and campaign at a global and national level for protection of civilians, negotiated reform, genuine dialogue with civil society and legitimate governments, and access to assistance.

Although his work for these well-established humanitarian agencies was rewarding, Jamie missed the ground field and wished to reconnect with people at a local level. Magic was to be the way, combining his passions.

Early in 2016, at the age of 55, Jamie launched the independent humanitarian initiative Magic for Smiles, which is based in Lebanon. He regularly performs magic shows for vulnerable Lebanese youngsters, as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugee children, all over Lebanon. He has conducted his shows in school halls and classrooms, in playgrounds and outdoor areas.

https://www.facebook.com/MagicForSmiles/
https://magicforsmiles.com/
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reFtJqLnWUo
https://www.gofundme.com/humanitarian-magic

His performances include adapted and tailored shows for Lebanese children with special needs.

His goal? "My goal is to take the stress out of their lives for a few minutes, and put smiles on their faces. But," he adds, "I'm not doing this just for fun!" Jamie believes that his magic shows have a positive impact on children who live in adverse and stressful environments and for those who have suffered trauma. Many have never seen magic and some have never experienced any entertainment at all.

During a show, children's eyes sparkle and their faces light up. "These children need fun," explains Jamie. They engage and they concentrate, trying to analyze how each trick is performed; exactly how does Alice, his much-loved pet rabbit, suddenly appear out of that hat? Youngsters exhibit self-confidence as they step up to assist a trick, and increased interaction is triggered as they participate in its production. Magic can reignite the latent imagination and creativity in the stressed and traumatized child; all too often these traits are dulled by constant exposure to an inhospitable or toxic emotional environment. "I believe magic has the potential to give people a new reality, an enhanced sense of creativity and a sense of possibility," he says. Encouraging children to be able to exercise their imaginations is a step toward creativity and toward having a dream. The shows are in Arabic except for when Jamie speaks jibberish (hence the stage name Jamie Jibberish), a nonsensical language which heightens the excitement.

Jamie performs several shows per week and has visited most areas of Lebanon through his work, making Alice a very well-traveled rabbit! At HOME she roams freely, chews Jamie's slippers and paperwork, and is best friends with his previous flatmate's dog!

Following shows, Jamie collects feedback from teachers, project leaders and participants so that future performances can be tailored to specific audiences. He continues to pursue the possibility of conducting research through magic for impact assessment and use in psychosocial support.

Funding remains an issue that limits his work. Being self-funded means that all work-related expenses should ideally be met from income generated by performances. Although there is a proposed base rate for charitable organizations, schools and nongovernmental organizations, as this often cannot be met Jamie normally performs for free. Recently he has started providing private magic shows for parties and events, as well as magic tuition. Income generated from these is used to subsidize his humanitarian shows. He has also constructed a crowdfunding platform for people to contribute. Magic for Smiles is undergoing registration in the U.K. as a charity and Jamie hopes that this will allow him to gain access to grants and diversified funding.

In the last few months Jamie traveled to the University of Exeter in the U.K. for an Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies lecture titled "Magic: An Illustrated Talk with Demonstrations," and has done the same at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Funds raised at these events will be used to subsidize performances in Lebanon for those organizations who simply do not have the funds to pay themselves.

With better funding, Jamie hopes to perform more shows for Lebanese children while expanding his reach to children in Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. The increased awareness will help improve the understanding of the serious goals of his work in Lebanon.

For children living in situations in which adversity has become the bulk of their daily lives, a little bit of magic is just what's needed to revive their childlike wonder.

By Ruth Moucharafieh

"It was possibly a desire to be different, or due to a feeling of insecurity, that I wanted to have the power to hold secrets!



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