

## **Watermill becomes culture spot** *Northern Lebanon sees horizons broadened*

'We want people to open up to other civilizations and ways of living'

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BEIRUT: A historic watermill in the northern Lebanese town of Zghorta has been turned into a cultural center with plans to host musical recitals, book signings and cultural seminars.

Construction on the mill, which was in a serious state of disrepair, was completed at the end of last year, according to Father Nader Nader, head of the Mar Sarkis and Bakhos Monastery which owns the mill.

A seminar on the Lebanese genetic connection with their Phoenician ancestors will be held in the mill on Friday by genetics researcher Pierre Zalloua, himself from Zghorta, and American scientist Spencer Wells, said Difaf committee member Mohsen Yammine.

The Difaf (which means riverbank) committee is in charge of the day-to-day operations of the cultural center.

"We chose Difaf because the watermill lies next to the Rashein River," Yammine added.

"We had feared that people might not rush to attend cultural events as much as they do to attend Haifa Wehbe's concerts," he said.

Public response has been very positive though, Father Nader said.

"Our area has been almost completely deprived for over 50 years from development plans," he said, adding: "The type of service offered by the center does not exist in Zghorta."

"Our only aim is to help young people learn about cultural things," said Olina Doueihy Dahdah, another Difaf committee member.

People in Zghorta, she said "are not used to services or centers built for everyone. The originality of the center lies in this, as most of the events which take place in our area are restricted to certain families."

Dahdah also spoke of Difaf's aim to provide the community in Zghorta, and the North of Lebanon, with cultural services to broaden their horizons.

"We want people to open up to other civilizations and ways of living through this center, which does not follow any political party or family," she said.

Since its opening, the center has held two piano recitals "by Tatiana Khoury, Rami Khalife - son of famous composer Marcel Khalife - and Syrian singer Kanan al-Azma," Dahdah said.

"The mill also held a book signing by Nada Barakat and Rachid Daef - author of "Maabad yanjah fi Baghdad (A temple succeeds in Baghdad)"- and a book about the monastery's history by Father Charbel Abi Khalil.

"The latest book signing took place last Saturday by Frederic Maatouk, who is the dean of the faculty of science at the Lebanese University, and who wrote about the relation between craftsmen and the economy," Yammine said.

The center also includes a computer room and a small library of around 200 books.

"We will start a 'book-raising' campaign to enlarge the library," said Mohsen.

According to Nader, Qabalan Yammine, who provided the funds to reconstruct the mill, is currently taking care of the costs of holding these events. However, "We will start charging symbolic fees later on to cover the increasing expenses," he said.

Rita Halabi, a pediatrician from Zghorta who attends the recitals said that she loves the cultural events.

"I support Difaf in its extraordinary work, and I don't mind paying a symbolic fee to enjoy events such as the ones taking place at the watermill," Halabi said.

The newly renovated watermill is around 250 years old, according to Father Nader, and was built at the beginning of the 19th century.

"It belonged to the house of Karami, and its property moved from one owner to another until Father Hanna Tayoun, head of the monastery bought it in 1904," he explained.

It was originally Nader's idea to transform the mill into a cultural center.

"The Antonine order, which the monastery follows, has three other cultural centers in Lebanon in areas such as Ajaltoun, and Antelias; this gave me the idea of opening one in Zghorta," he said.