

I want to thank H.H. Sheikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai, Minister of Finance & Industry under whose patronage this great event is taking place.

H.E Mariam Mohammed Khalfan Al Roumi; Minister of Social Affairs, UAE & honored guests, thank you for having me here at Rehab Dubai, 2008.

Hello, my name is Lily Bandak and I am an Arab-American photographer and the only Arab-American whose work is in the permanent collection of the White House. I have had Multiple Sclerosis since 1980 but it took physicians 4 years to diagnose my illness. However, my illness does not define who I am; it is my work that speaks my story, which is on exhibit here today.

People always, ask me the same thing: Lily, what keeps you going? Well, I'll tell you; I have always been a determined person and becoming sick, though life changing, has not changed this about me. Since becoming sick and living with my illness, I have wanted to help people with disabilities, especially in the Middle

East, where my people are from. It has not been easy to depend on people for everything in my life for the past 25 plus years, but I keep going. In my day to day life and travels throughout the Middle East and North Africa, one thing that keeps me going is the hope that one day I can bring the knowledge and implementation of the services that I have benefited from to the Middle East, the region of my birth, to help the people here with disabilities get the same chance if not better than what I experience in the West. With over 10 million disabled people in the region and growing, it is time that we bring the issue of disability rights to the forefront.

When I was initially diagnosed with my illness in 1984, I spent the first years feeling sorry for myself and refused to see or talk to any of my friends, I even thought about suicide. For years I looked around the world for a cure, traveling throughout the United States and to China and Europe. Finally, I got tired and decided that life goes on, with or without me so I might as well do something constructive with my life. My physical and occupational therapist

told me about the numerous programs available through the American government that would allow me to go back to my photography, even if it was in a wheelchair. The government has programs that provide assistive technology for the disabled to help them carry on with their career as well as laws that protect the rights of people with disabilities in day-to-day life as well as in the work place.

I began by contacting the many agencies available to the disabled in the United States. This included both government and private organizations. It was not always easy because this was before computers and the internet and I had to make many, many calls. I called the people in charge – including my Senator, Congressmen, and heads of social services. I found the best available equipment to make me independent. I found that there were many people willing to help when I played an active role in my own well-being. The United States has many proactive programs for the disabled, including rehabilitation services, assistive technology and access

to equipment. Additionally, laws have been enacted to protect, defend and further the rights of the disabled. Public buildings, sidewalks and parking lots are designed to accommodate our needs. I can go anywhere without worrying about being denied access because I am in a wheelchair.

My area of interest in photography is the Arab World. Through all the years that I have been living in the US, I tried to explain about our culture and history, unfortunately, I was only able to reach a few. Western media has become negative against the Islamic culture, so I decided to photograph the countries in the Middle East and exhibit my work in the West. Unfortunately planning for my trips has, at times caused anxiety due to the fact that I must carry so much of my equipment with me when I travel: for example; a portable ramp in order to access sidewalks and buildings among other things. You see, it is near impossible to find accessible sidewalks and buildings for wheelchairs in the Middle East.

In the Middle East, there are many families that have a disabled person in the family. In our culture, we take care of our own, but the caregiver: (be it mother, father, or other member of the family) needs a break. They cannot take care of that family member 24 hours a day, we all need a break; and this is where social services steps in. Government sponsored programs should provide in-home caregivers: this includes; nurses, nurses aides, physical therapist, occupational therapist, speech pathologist, etc; who go to the home to assist and relieve the family caregiver.

What did we call it back in the 50s and 60s in the United States where there was so much discrimination against the black population? We called it prejudice. What do you think we should call it now when a person with a disability; because of their disability, cannot find employment or has no access to a public building or a public sidewalk? Is it Prejudice, discrimination or what? Unfortunately, human nature, at large, judges one another by the way we look whether we are black or white; in a wheelchair,

tall or short; fat or skinny; and by other physical attributes. We, the disabled; in general, are viewed as an inferior population. I am appealing to our great Arab society to make a change in the way we view the disabled. We are not asking for your pity but are deserving of your respect.

We are one of the oldest civilizations on this earth and I see that the UAE is going to be one of the most modern civilizations of the new millennium. I am proud of the UAE for recently signing the Protocol to Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities Act. This shows that we are headed in the right direction. But now, we have to ratify this piece of legislation and make it into law as Panama and others have done. Just signing is not enough. There is so much beauty in our lands – let us include the whole of society in it too. I want to take back to the western world photographs of the advancement of the Arab World, a world that includes and honors the disabled in their society.

There are now over 10 million disabled people among the Arab population. The UAE and other Gulf countries have a substantial amount of disabled population. Not to mention the continuing wars in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, the number of disabled persons in our region continues to grow. We do not need shame or pity – we are competent but we do need support by addressing our needs through programs, laws and funding our projects.

Arab Governments need to recognize that people with disabilities have rights and need to be part of society including accessible buildings, ramps etc. Example – Sheikha Jameela Al Qasimi, what she has done in Sharjah is something I am so proud of. I have traveled to many places throughout the Middle East and I never found it as easy as when I went to Sharjah last year. There were so many ramps or wheelchair accessible sidewalks that made it easy for me and others in wheelchairs. People with disabilities are like everybody else; they want to get an education, they want to go

out, they want to go to stores, they want to go shopping, they want to conduct business like everyone else.

Change must come from governments – this includes change in their attitude as well as policy changes. They need to recognize that transformation begins at the top level. In order for any impact to be felt, governments must step in and advocate for the rights of the disabled community through political and administrative action. Laws are needed to support people with disabilities who wish to work. It is imperative to scrutinize and refine all laws that will lead to productive citizenry for all people in the Middle East.

More programs should be introduced in Ministries of Health like providing aides, nurses, or therapists to help the disabled. Also in the Ministries of Labor programs like the ones that help me go back to work like vocational rehabilitation, which pays for assistive technology.

Many countries in the Middle East are capable of implementing rehabilitative services and programs for the disabled. The UAE

has proven that it is a world leader in many arenas: such as, we have the world's tallest building, the world's only 7 star hotel, man-made islands and the world's largest shopping mall to name a few. In regards to human rights, now we can take the lead in the region, if not the world by introducing and ambitiously championing legislation for the rights of people who are disabled. For example, disabled children, just like any other children need to get an education and what a wonderful job Sheikh Al Nahayan (Minister of higher Education) is doing with The Future Center in Abu Dhabi in the way of trying to educate kids with disabilities through vocational training.

One of the companies that impressed me with their support for people with disabilities was DP World. They believed in my ability as an artist to carry out the project that I am working on, which I think is a very good project, whose mission is to try to show the world the history, advancements and culture of the Islamic and Arab World which is so misunderstood by the West and what

better place to showcase this than the world's most watched event; the Olympic Games, taking place this summer in Beijing, China. I want the world to see my abilities, the way my sponsors see me, and not my disability.

There are people like Mr. Sharaf, the CEO of DP World, who enthusiastically encourage me both financially and on a personal level. I live in Delaware, and requested a meeting with Mr. Sharaf. He asked me to meet him in DC, and then changed it to New York. I did not use my disability as an excuse and immediately made the journey to see him. By not feeling sorry for myself, he did not feel sorry for me, and supported the proposal I presented to him.

I also wish to acknowledge His Royal Highness Prince Al Waleed. He is a visionary that empowers women to fulfill their dreams. With his financial assistance, I was able to have much needed surgery to strengthen my health and continue my work. And last but not least, I would like to thank Sheikha Jameela Qassimi and Her Royal

Highness, Princess Haya for being supportive by inviting me to the UAE last year to photograph this beautiful country.

We need more corporate leaders who take the time to listen and realize that people with disabilities have much to offer to the world. Raising funds for my Olympic project on the Arab World disability awareness remains a top priority. Companies and individuals are encouraged to contribute to this cause in any way possible.

The key to all this is that by making it possible for people with disabilities to be mobile, to have the comfort and security to know that there is professional funded support to back our basic needs, to know that they have rights as gainful employees, thus eliminating the feeling of being a financial and emotional burden on family, then people with disabilities can focus on achieving rather than on existing.

So if you ask me, what keeps me going all these years? It's my strength, which comes from knowing that I have the ability to make a statement, for those who are disabled and have the abilities to

contribute their knowledge and skills to the world in which we live in.

Most importantly, what strengthens me and keeps me going is the support of my mother, who for the last 25 plus years has encouraged me to go on. She is now 85 years old and my biggest supporter and best friend. I want to thank her and let her know that without her support and love, I could not have made it this far.

I will continue to use my mind and spirit to provide awareness and wisdom to those who aspire to work with for the improvement and equality of the disabled.