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Crossing the globe to 'change the world'

Women from the West Bank visit Pensacola to help combat domestic violence in their homeland

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A group of Palestinian women from the West Bank visited Pensacola this week during a nationwide trip studying ways to combat domestic violence.

The delegation, comprised of a judge, policewoman, attorney and women's rights advocate, is visiting the country for the first time to study legal protections for women, intervention programs and social services offered to domestic-violence victims.

"We're going to take this information back and try to integrate it into our society and police forces," said Wafaa Alaraj, a legal adviser in the West Bank Ministry of Women's Affairs.

The West Bank is a Palestinian territory to the west of Israel.

The group, which arrived Wednesday and will leave Sunday, is being hosted by the Gulf Coast Citizen Diplomacy Council as part of the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program.

While in Pensacola, the delegates learned about emergency room procedures for rape victims and the criminal justice system's role in prosecuting sex offenders and domestic abusers.

They also visited battered women's shelters and observed educational programs aimed at sex offenders.

On Friday afternoon, the group toured the Florida Department of Law Enforcement building to see the biology labs that analyze sexual assault evidence.

"We're very impressed by the quality of service given here," said Kholoud Mohammad Ahmad Shaweh, a Shari'a judge. "We see people in action here, not just theoretically talking about programs, but actually doing it."

Shari'a is a body of Islamic religious law.



From left, members of the West Bank delegation Rania Abdul Kareem and her interpreter, Asma Abdi, watch as FDLE senior crime lab analyst Teresa Pribbenow demonstrates a lab test. The Gulf Coast Diplomacy Council, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of State, organized the women's visit to Pensacola. See more photos at pnj.com (Tony Giberson/tgiberson@pnj.com)

The women wore Westernized clothing — two of them with colorful scarves covering their heads. They were accompanied by interpreters who translated their Arabic.

"The biggest challenge we have is the cultural atmosphere does not support us very much in dealing with combating violence against women," said Rania Haymeh Ahmed Abdul Kareem, who works in family protection services.

Nancy Newland, Pensacola Junior College Police Chief, told the women that abuses against women are a serious problem in the U.S. as well as in the Middle East.

"But if you stay with this, I think that one day women can change the world," Newland said.



Wafa Ayyad of the West Bank takes notes on her visit to the Florida Dept. of Law Enforcement Friday afternoon April 24, 2009. The Gulf Coast Diplomacy Council in conjunction with the U.S. State Dept. organized the visit from the West Bank Delegation.



Carol Mathis, far right, through interpreter Asma Abdi, right center, explains to Wafaa Alaraj, left, and Rania Abdul Kareem, left center, how the Florida Dept. of Law Enforcement stores its crime evidence. Four women from the West Bank paid a visit the Gulf Coast to learn about "Combating Domestic Violence Against Women."



Carol Mathis, top left, through interpreter Asma Abdi, bottom left, explains to Wafaa Alaraj, right, how the Florida Dept. of Law Enforcement stores its crime evidence. Four women from the West Bank paid a visit the Gulf Coast to learn about "Combating Domestic Violence Against Women."



Beth Spence Green, Chief of Forensic Services of Florida Dept. of Law Enforcement, top right, explains the mission of the agency to a group of West Bank Diplomats through interpreter Rania Hijazeen, right center, during the group visit to the Gulf Coast Friday afternoon.



Rania Abdul Kareem, left, and Asma Abdi, left center, learn some of the Florida Dept. of Law Enforcement's procedures from handling evidence from the Magda Clanton, right center, and Carol Mathis, right of the agency Friday afternoon April 24, 2009.