

Q&A with Ayman Elsayed

Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

The deputy director of the Library of Alexandria's Planetarium Science Center on global partners, local heroes, and surviving a revolution

Egypt's cultural and educational institutions were not spared the chaos in the country early this year. Looters broke into Cairo's Egyptian Museum and other sites during the revolution, stealing and smashing ancient treasures. Yet, thanks to an inspiring demonstration, the Planetarium Science Center (PSC) at the Library of Alexandria came out unharmed.

Ayman Elsayed, deputy director of the center and ASTC's 2010 Lee Kimche McGrath Worldwide Fellow, will attend the 2011 ASTC Annual Conference (conference.astc.org) in Baltimore, October 15–18. He tells his institution's story, and discusses how working together benefits science centers worldwide.

Ayman, if you can tell me—how did the Library of Alexandria survive the revolution of earlier in 2011?

Thanks a lot for being with me today. First of all, the library is located in Alexandria, which is the second biggest city in Egypt. And the revolution—we were having a lot of actions in all the cities in Egypt, but mainly it was in three cities: Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez. And for Alexandria, the library itself was in the middle of the action because the square that was hosting all the demonstrations was just about 500 meters to 1 kilometer away from the library. That's why all the demonstrations were just beside the library. But we were very lucky to have the people of Alexandria from the beginning of the demonstrations until the revolution—they were protecting the library, themselves, from their colleagues, they were trying to make like a ring around the library all the time during the demonstrations, telling their colleagues, "This is our library; we don't want to hurt it. It is the center of the culture of Egypt and mainly Alexandria." And nothing happened, I mean hurting the building itself, during the demonstrations.

After the actions all the sections of the library were making a lot of activities and events related to all the circumstances that were happening in Egypt, like hosting lectures, hosting some of the most important people in politics in the Egyptian community now. Of course from all the parties now there is no governing party in Egypt, we are still waiting for the elections at the end of the year, so we were hosting many people from all of the sides. And I think something like 15,000 to 20,000 people have attended lectures in just one month after the revolution [by] many... famous people now in the community who are now participating in rebuilding the community, especially in the politics view.

That's fantastic. So clearly it was very important that the library was protected and survived the rioting and the looting, but at the time, why do you think that the locals of Alexandria were so moved to protect the library, and why do you think the library and Planetarium Science Center are so valued within the community?

The library was open since 2002 and since then we were trying as much as we could to embed the culture of the science and all the fields of culture inside the Egyptian community. The library was opened in a time that similar institutions in Egypt were not there. Maybe in the last 10 years, between 2000 and 2010, some other institutions were trying to begin, but the library itself, especially with the history of the ancient library, we were trying to work with all categories of the Egyptian community. For us, for the planetarium, we were focusing on the kids and the youth and this work was including activities, festivities, event workshops for the kids, planetariums and lectures hosting many famous characters from Egypt and from all over the world. I continue that maybe more than 20 Nobel laureates have visited the library in these 10 years. For all these reasons and many others that I can't mention in these few minutes, the Egyptians were really recognizing the library and its role in rebuilding the culture in Egypt. That's why they thought that they have to protect this building because most of them were thinking that this is their building and they have to protect it from any other people who were looking to damage or hurt it and other buildings.

What does your work there in particular entail? And beyond that what are your responsibilities in the greater science center community?

I'm now the deputy director of the science center and I'm supervising all the activities that we are doing. We have three sections in the science center—a hands-on facility, a planetarium, and a history of science museum. Also we are doing a lot of activities in the

schools. We are hosting more than four annual festivals about science and environment. We are holding many contests and competitions between school students in general science fields or robotics or other fields. Me myself I'm representing the science center in many international events like the [Ecsite—the] European Network of Science Centres [and Museums], ASTC ([the] international science centers network). Also this year I will be participating in the [Science Centre] World Congress... in Cape Town and also in many other meetings in many other countries, especially in the region in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

I know you had mentioned two in particular: NAMES, and then the pan-African network that I understand you're in the process of establishing.

NAMES was established in the year 2006. It was an initiative from the library to gather all the science centers in the region because there are many networks over the world, network of North Americans, the network of Europe, Asia, South Africa, but in this region, there were no organizations that were collecting them. NAMES, which is the North Africa and Middle East Science Centers [Network], was established in 2006 and now we have six members in this network: Tunisia, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and also we are having requests from about 10 other science centers and maybe they will join us in the coming general assembly meeting, which will be next year. For the pan-African network, it is an initiative also from our science center to have a network for all the African science centers. We are still in the works. It is something more difficult to have all the contacts in Africa, but we are doing a lot of work with many of our partners in France—we are collecting all their contacts in the francophone countries in Africa. Also, we have some work with the science centers in South Africa because we have contacts for all the science centers in the other countries in the south part of Africa. And the Arab countries, which are in the north of Africa, also they are helping us especially that they are with us in the NAMES network. So we still maybe have some work to do; I hope by the end of 2012 it will be there. But NAMES is somehow more active. We are having many activities together between the members, and this year at Ecsite, I presented [about] the library at Warsaw, Poland. NAMES was there for the first time, I mean officially represented, in one of the sessions, talking about our cooperation with Mediterranean countries and European countries.

So clearly you are determined to establish partnerships among science centers both in the region and throughout the world. Why do you find this so important?

In this field all our colleagues are depending on networking. Nobody is working alone. Especially that we—all the science centers all over the world are looking to each other. The visitors and our clients are the same. Maybe we have different cultures—the clients in Europe may be different than those in America, may be different than those in the Arabs and Africa—but all of them are looking for fun and for science, and for enjoying their time and building on their kids. The experience that some of the centers can have through the networks they are getting to their new colleagues and now I'm talking about us when we joined Ecsite for the first time in 2004, we got a lot of experience from joining the Ecsite network and doing some work with science centers in the Mediterranean and Italy. We had a lot of work with them, also France and for having some cooperation with science centers in the U.S., especially the Exploratorium. Our cooperations were very beneficial for us. Our director had an internship in the Exploratorium for one month and during this and as a result of his cooperation we got a lot of designs for our exhibits that helped our engineers do our first version of the science center in 2003. Also we had another cooperation with the Maryland Science Center in Baltimore, and I spent one month there having lots of meetings with all the departments in the science centers, which was very helpful for me in the beginning of my career. And through all these cooperations with all different experiences in different countries you can take the result of your work is not only through beginning from the first step, you can know where your colleagues have reached and you build on their experience. And this is not going to happen only except through networks.

Clearly your trip to America again for the ASTC Annual Conference this fall is part of that process of international networking. What in particular are you hoping to accomplish?

We are participating in the ASTC [conference], but not every year. I think this will be the third or the fourth time only that we participate in the ASTC conference. I hope that through this year's participation to have some cooperation with science centers that we didn't meet before, I know that there [are] more than 400 science centers in the U.S. and maybe through these meetings I can have some contacts with new people. Also of course through these meetings you can be introduced to the most updated technology and ideas in introducing the science through the informal educational places, which are science centers and museum exhibitions. And of course I'm looking always in all the meetings that I attend for trainings and internships for my staff. We got a lot of chances for similar things through

past meetings that I attended in the U.S. or in Europe.

You've mentioned a few ways that the library is benefiting Egypt as it rebuilds and reconstructs its infrastructure and its government. I'm wondering what role you think science centers and museums should continue to play both in Egypt's future and in that of countries in North Africa and throughout the Middle East.

Of course science centers are doing a very important role in this very critical period in Egypt, and in the last 20 to 25 years the education in Egypt was going not in the right direction. And I think the informal education which the library and science center is a very important party in this, will have a very important responsibility to continue our work in the schools and to try to help the official and formal parties, which are the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and any other official parties who are in the field of education. And this help will be in giving them some experience, contacting them with some experience the parties in international countries. And also for us we are training a lot of teachers from the schools to give them some experience in improving their work with the students in the schools. We have more than 200 science clubs in the schools, which are—I mean a science center in each school giving them an infrastructure from computers to kids, workshops, training, guides, training teachers to use this facility for their kids. Also for the Ministry of Higher Education we have a lot of cooperation with universities, especially Alexandria University. And I think in the next few months this cooperation has to continue and has to be focused on this group of youth who will be in the market in the coming few years and they will be responsible for building the new era of Egypt.

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