


**PROFESSION**

Co-founder and CEO of Mish Madrasa, an NGO that offers free after-school education in Cairo's Saft El Laban and Rooftop garden owner



## ABDELHALIM Wafa

“ When my cousin Mustafa, the founder of Mish Madrasa, left Egypt to study, I became responsible for our family’s neighborhood education initiative. We teach Arabic, English, math and street survival skills to children from the neighborhood, free of charge and based on volunteerism. Since 2015, we have had a rooftop garden that we are using as an educational space for Mish Madrasa. It is where we study, play, and enjoy the greenery. Together with our children, we care for the plants. ”

I used to be a totally different person a few years ago, thinking that Mish Madrasa was a waste of time. I kept asking my cousin: ‘Do you have too much free time?’ I have a degree in tourism and hotel management, an entirely different career, but now Mish Madrasa is my passion. I got involved in the rooftop garden through something I love – making use of reusable objects. I made things for the garden using scrap pipes and wood – as you can see, most of the materials in our garden are reused. We did not buy anything.

In 2015, AUC helped us by providing the materials and tools to start building the garden. We started with a manual, conventional system, planting in pots and watering the plants by hand. We planted a variety of vegetables, including tomatoes, cabbage, herbs and rocket salad. In 2019, we received an additional hydroponic system through our partnership with AUC and the U.S. Forest Service that we now use to grow lettuce. We produce food for our household, and the children of Mish Madrasa take home some of the produce as well. This production benefits and affects them and their families. We sit on the roof with our own family, putting down our carpets and all sitting together. Young people from the neighborhood ask us if they can come and have a barbecue on our roof – they come, party, clean up again and leave. The garden has started to influence the entire neighborhood.

I am the main caretaker of the garden, but we split up tasks among family members. Our family owns some agricultural land around Saft El Laban, so we had some prior knowledge of farming. My dad planted on his balcony, so I grew up with some interest in growing plants. Saft El Laban was an agricultural area only 10 years ago. All the surrounding buildings used to be green land, but now it has all turned into built-up area. It is now all about architectural development and building for profit. Nobody thought that with the destruction of these green lands we would be left with no green breath, dying of car exhaust, both environmentally and psychologically.

I get relieved when I work with green plants and spend time every day, taking care of them. My mindset started to change bit by bit. It has an impact on the children as well. We noticed that the children’s aggressive, violent attitudes started to turn into a more peaceful and polite mode, spending time in the garden and treating their mentors and peers in a polite manner. These are things they do not learn in the streets.

So, we definitely need to have the rooftop garden notion grounded in our mentality. The children themselves are a source of strength, with their spirit and energy and the continuous love to work and spend time on the roof. ”

