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## FEATURE STORY

### BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP THROUGH SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

What if working on a farm could help someone earn income, and also become a more informed and active member and leader of their society? This is the mission of our fellow environmental and sustainable development activists at **Grow Dat Youth Farm**.

Earlier this year, *Leo Gorman*, the **Farm Manager** at Grow Dat Youth Farm, emailed us and asked to meet with us in Lebanon during his upcoming trip in July-August. *Rita Khawand* and *Alexis Baghdadi* hosted Leo in **Saidoun** one weekend and invited him to present the work of Grow Dat to the SOILS team on **August 5, 2018**.

Born in **New Orleans** (Louisiana) after the devastating hurricane Katrina of 2005, Grow Dat Youth Farm has helped many of the city's **youth (16-24 years old)** address and overcome problems in their society, namely racial and economic segregation, as well as environmental degradation, through working and learning on an actual farm.

Candidates from different social and economic backgrounds apply for a position at the farm then submit to an interview where their motivations and social skills are assessed. The selected participants are then employed on the farm from January to June. They spend **50% of their time working in the field** where they learn and apply sustainable agriculture practices or help sell the produce at farmers' markets and through weekly baskets for participants. They spend the remaining **50% of their time attending classes and workshops** that teach them practical skills and mechanisms to develop their self-confidence, teamwork, compassion, empathy, and advocacy skills. Essentially, the participants are paid to both work and learn... and they also get free veggies through a shared harvest program!

Sustainable agriculture practices at Grow Dat Youth Farm focus on **soil management and regeneration** through growing **cover crops, nitrogen-fixing plants, and plants that attract beneficial insects**, as well as applying **natural fertilizers**.

Classes cover **agro-ecology** (e.g. biodiversity, mutually beneficial relationships), **sustainability and self-sufficiency** (energy management, cooking, etc.), and **social advocacy** (inclusion, management, etc.).

This agricultural/academic space is located inside the **New Orleans City Park** (which used to be a plantation). Grow Dat Youth Farm partnered with **Tulane University** to get access to the location and develop the academic program for participants. Grow Dat Youth Farm is funded by foundation grants (50%), individual donors (25%) and farm income (25%). The name "Grow Dat" (Grow That) is derived from a popular American football chant for New Orleans' home team, the Saints (Who dat? Who dat? Who dat said dey gonna beat dem Saints?).

We at SOILS were eager to compare notes about sustainable agricultural practices, particularly cover crop management - in which we are not fully experienced - and preserving biodiversity.

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During his stay in Saidoun, we introduced Leo to endemic plants and trees (sage, oregano, thyme, fennel, carob, oak, arbutus, and juniper, to name a few). During his subsequent visits to other parts of Lebanon (including a hike to Qornet Al-Sawda), he was excited to be able to identify local species on his own. Leo was also interested in our work on identifying local fauna and flora (as part of our project, AFIR Beekeeping and Nature Discovery Center), which encouraged him to introduce a similar program at Grow Dat Youth Farm.

The farm/university model at Grow Dat Youth Farm is certainly very interesting and opens up a wide range of possibilities for projects with our local partners. If you'd like to find out more, visit the website [Grow Dat Youth Farm](#).

Shared by the Editorial Team



Photo by GROW DAT

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## LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

### BENEFICIAL INSECTS TAKE OFF WITH "DA'SOUKA"

This year, *Mayssaa Cheayto* and I presented **DA'SUKA**, a rearing center for beneficial insects, at the third **National Competition for Sustainable Development**... and won **first place!**

There were **21 participants** in this year's edition of the competition organized by the **LEBA Association**, in partnership with the **Union of Municipalities of Jezzine** and the **Université Saint Joseph Faculty of Engineering (ESIB)**. As students of the **Lebanese University, Faculty of Agriculture**, we had both been toying with different ideas related to entomology. I was also busy with other projects related to bumblebees and other insects in my home in Beit Chabab and the Tannourine reserve. Our friend *Rita Khawand* from **SOILS Permaculture Association Lebanon** had encouraged - even "badgered" - me to participate in the sustainable development competition and present an entomological project, so Maysaa and I came up with DA'SUKA (دعسوقة) which is Arabic for "ladybug," one of the most well-known beneficial insects (it devours aphids and other insect pests).

Essentially, DA'SUKA would rear beneficial insects such as **ladybugs, mantises, parasitic wasps**, and even certain **bacteria**, to control pests and diseases in natural and organic agriculture. This would be a first step in the right direction towards reducing the indiscriminate use of chemical pesticides and exploring more sustainable alternatives as part of an **integrated pest management (IPM) strategy**. It would also preserve **biodiversity** and help enhance **degraded ecosystems**.

In the first phase of the competition, we introduced the panel of judges to the idea of DA'SUKA. We then had to present a working concept and prepare a feasibility study for developing and rolling out our different products. This was the challenging part. We really wanted our project to take off but it was ambitious and required quite a bit of capital to reach its full maturity. At the same time, if we were to win any prize, we would only be receiving a cash reward, not comprehensive funding for DA'SUKA. To remedy this, we decided to take a step-wise approach and develop our offerings in stages, starting with... ladybugs, naturally.

And the rest is history - in the making.

Of course, it will take some time and resources to get DA'SUKA up and running, especially as a standalone company. It would make more sense to run it as a program within a larger organization - at least initially. This is where another dream of mine comes in: a Lebanese national entomology association!

The creation of **L.E.A.F.** (Lebanese Entomology Association & Friends - but the name might change) is already in the making. For now, we only have a Facebook page but we will soon complete our registration and the structuring of our organization.

L.E.A.F. will fill an important gap on the national level. It will notably feature a **database** of local insects compiled through the joint efforts of local entomologists in collecting and identifying insect specimens around the country and the region. This will be crucial to **taxonomy** work in the region, as many existing species are not accurately classified or described. Worse, some species are being subjected to "taxonomic vandalism," i.e. renamed by new observers who try pass them off as "new" species. This may seem trivial to the average person, but it represents a mess for serious researchers who waste time trying to clear up these mistakes. It also means robbing countries of their natural heritage! This brings us to another essential role of L.E.A.F.: the **conservation and biological monitoring** of insect species in Lebanon and the region.

Finally, L.E.A.F. will spearhead **research** about different insects' roles in local ecosystems and use this knowledge to develop new **tools to solve environmental problems** - for example rearing beneficial insects to protect crops and vulnerable species, as with DA'SUKA.

Stay tuned to our news on Facebook: [Lebanese Entomology Association](#)

Shared by Wael Yammine



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# LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

## JELLYFISH: BEAUTIFUL CROCHET ART FROM USED PLASTIC BAGS

Jellyfish...the name conjures up images of floating gelatinous creatures and nasty stings. But for a turtle and a few other marine animals, a jellyfish is a delicious meal. Not so when the sea is littered with plastic bags, which turtles too often mistake for their favorite food. The consequences can be dire. Land pollution from plastic bags is equally detrimental, affecting soils, plants, trees, waterways, and a variety of animals, as well as humans.

This is where **Jellyfish** comes in: a social and environmental venture whose aim is to upcycle used plastic bags into fashionable handbags and a number of other items, thereby preventing them from ending up in nature, while providing additional income to the ladies involved in the project.

It all began with a **UNESCO-funded training** of a group of **Syrian refugee ladies** in the **Bekaa, Lebanon**, aiming at helping them set up their own business. Instead of the classical needlework and crochet they aimed to produce, they were taught to cut **used plastic bags** into **"plarn"** (plastic yarn). We named this project "Jellyfish" in reference to the plastic bags so often mistaken for those marine animals by sea turtles. It was **November 2016**, close to the holiday season, and as a trial, the few Jellyfish ladies back then crocheted a number of small Christmas ornaments, which they attempted to sell at **Souk el Tayeb**, the organic market in Beirut. Success was instant. Orders came in for more items, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Currently, the Jellyfish team comprises **10 ladies**, most of them working full-time on the project, from their own homes in the Bekaa and other areas in Lebanon. They ask local shops, neighbors, relatives, and friends, to collect used plastic bags for them, which they then clean and cut into strips. Sometimes, their husbands who have difficulty finding work, or their teenage daughters, help them in this. Lately, they have also been receiving used plastic bags from people who have heard about the project either directly or through social media, and want to make a difference, no matter how small, to a better environment in Lebanon, especially with the ongoing waste management crisis. **An average-sized Jellyfish basket can save up to 150 plastic bags!**

*Alaa Al Zouhour*, 22, the youngest of the Jellyfish ladies, has learned crochet on the job and now produces beautiful blue beach bags with uneven patches of color, her specialty, for which she has been receiving regular orders. Alaa is also the coordinator of the project, meeting with the other ladies in their homes, distributing plastic bags when needed, collecting finished items and checking them for quality. She is also responsible for sales and accounts and is always seen with the Jellyfish products wherever they are on display, discussing the techniques with clients and taking orders for customized items. She manages all this while studying for her baccalaureate exams, which should allow her to enter university and pursue a higher degree.

Each Jellyfish item is unique, with its distinctive combination of colors, depending on the shade of plastic bags used. **Handbags** and **beach bags** are light, washable, and durable. Some have bamboo or plastic handles. **Pouches** come in zigzag or striped patterns, adorned with buttons or a colored zipper. **Placemats** are round or rectangular, always colorful. **Toys** are cute and filled with the remaining scraps (handles, sealed ends) from cut bags. Any leftovers are sent to *Ziad Abi Chaker* to be converted into his **"ecoboards."** Nothing goes to waste.

The items have been bought by locals and many foreigners visiting Lebanon. Some have also found their way to a shop or two abroad. What pleases the ladies the most? Pictures of their handbags sent to them by clients, from the various countries they have been taken to: Australia, Iceland, the U.S., Japan, Italy, Spain, the UAE, Greece... the list keeps growing.

To see the full range of our items, place an order, or donate your used plastic bags, follow us on Facebook: [Jellyfish](#).

Shared by *Laila Zahed*

All photos courtesy of Jellyfish



# LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

## PHOENUS: FOR THE LOVE OF BICYCLES AND CHILDREN

After riding his **Triclus** for more than 5 hours(!) in the Deir el Qamar square, strolling between the handcraft stands, 10-year old *Salim* still did not want to go home... It was the longest ride we ever witnessed... Salim did not seem tired at all. He was cruising the whole time peacefully among the pedestrians visiting the Souk el Tayeb stands.

Since the spring of **2018** alone, we have been present in 11 festivals across the country as **Phoenus**, the inventors of the Triclus, a children's tricycle entirely imagined and built in Lebanon. After each festival, one child remained imprinted in our memory. During Jezzine's festival, *Georgio* rode his Triclus for more than two hours on each of the 4 days. In Douma, three and a half-year-old *Joya* rode her Triclus better than a Formula One champion.

When we ask the children why they like Triclus, their answer is: **because it is quick**. Their parents, answer is: **because it looks very safe**.

Was this all intended during the initial design stage of our product? The short answer is No.

I started out as a mechanical/industrial engineer with an extensive experience in the automotive industry in France, Germany, and the UK. I held 8 delivered patents, registered in the EU, US, and Japan. Yet my dream was always to launch a product design and manufacturing activity in Lebanon. When I sold one of my patents to a German automotive supplier in 2008, I finally had the chance to do so. Shortly after, Phoenus was born.

Our constant drive was the creation of innovative, robust, and minimalist mobility products for highly demanding customers that the mainstream Asian competitors have little chance to compete against.

### 1. THE TRICLUS

Our first product was the Triclus. A light and robust stainless steel frame, front and rear ball bearings, a seat back, and the low seat position, all contribute to minimize the effort needed to ride a Triclus and make it a very "quick" tricycle. On the other hand, the natural suspension due to the hanging seat position, the very low seat position, and the opening in front of the seat, are ergonomic and safety aspects inherent to this tricycle. Triclus comes with an opening between the seat and the front wheel to facilitate the rider's step-in. That is why the tricycle's signature frame runs above the rider, unlike most commercially available tricycles.

Due to its modular design, Triclus is also available as a sidecar and a trailer assembly. It can be packed in a matter of a few seconds in any car thanks to the quick release of its rear wheels and axle.

Triclus also comes with solid Polyurethane tires, which makes it virtually maintenance free. At the **Arcenciel** outdoor park of the **Taanayel convent**, which hosts the oldest Triclus park in Lebanon, **the same 24 tricycles have been in operation since 2010!**

### 2. THE TWICLUS

In 2017, on the occasion of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the run bike invention by the German *Karl von Drais*, Phoenus launched its second product, **Twiclus**, a run bike (also called push bike or balance bike) available in two sizes (for 2 to 5, and 5 to 8-year-old children). Run bikes have no pedals and are an optimal way to teach children how to ride a bike. Twiclus is made of plywood with a stainless steel front assembly. The children safe (EN71) glue and wood protection are directly imported from Austria and Germany.

### 3. MORE PRODUCTS

In addition to these bikes, Phoenus' product range includes custom-made pedal-driven carousels and geodesic domes for indoor and outdoor use. The domes can be used as a playhouse or a climbing structure. All our products enjoy a five-year warranty, and comply with the EN71 European toy safety norms.

Our manufacturing process is based on a combination of precise technologies (such as numerically controlled machining and laser cutting) and high-end manual finishing. We design and manufacture not only our products but also all the dedicated tools and machines needed for manufacturing, mainly using a simple sandwich technique developed in-house and based on laser cutting.

We value the available raw materials by building minimalistic heavy duty products, and make them available to schools, Kindergartens, NGOs and public outdoor/indoor resorts. In parallel, we concentrate on rental activities. Our products have been acquired by more than 20 schools and kindergarten. They are also available for rental in 7 resorts. In Byblos's public garden, Triclus is available for rental since 2015, where each of the 20 bikes provides an average of 500 rides per year. In addition to these activities, we organize events for various occasions where the children can ride our products, assemble laser-cut minibikes or mini geodesic domes, or help assemble a Twiclus and understand its different manufacturing phases.



Photo by Phoenus



Photo by Phoenus



Photo by Phoenus

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## LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

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Our products draw people's attention by their minimalist designs, using continuous lines, and the use of ecological and high-end materials such as stainless steel and laminated wood.

Our products are not available in retail shops as our main goal is not simply to sell as many products as we can, but rather to reach as many children as we can, while minimizing the use of raw materials. The last thing we would want to take part in is the surrounding consumerism and fallacy of unlimited economic growth.

When selling a product to a single-use customer, we propose to rebuy it from him/her at half the initial price once their child outgrows it or they no longer need it. That bike would then be used as a rental, which is our way of closing the material loop in our product.

We are currently exploring expansion possibilities in other countries.

For all inquiries regarding sales, rental, or any children event, please do not hesitate to contact us at [yahala@phoenus.com](mailto:yahala@phoenus.com) or by phone on +961-70-893205. Or visit our Facebook page: **Phoenus**

Shared by Nicolas Abou Chaar



Photo by Phoenus



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## A THOUGHT TO SHARE ...

**“People from a planet without flowers would think we must be mad with joy the whole time to have such things about us.”**



**–Iris Murdoch (1919-1999)  
A Fairly Honourable Defeat**

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