

even in seemingly impossible tasks: Salaam Centre, Egypt



Hi, my name is Mariam. I am 12 years old and I live with my mum and dad, and my six brothers and sisters, in a one-roomed house in the middle of the Zabaleen area – in the Ezbet el Nakhl district of Cairo. We are a Zabaleen family, which means we're Rubbish Collectors. My dad goes out each night with the donkey and cart, collecting rubbish from people's houses and businesses around Cairo. When he gets home early in the morning, he is so tired that he pushes us all out of bed so that he can get in instead, but my mum gets up then and makes us breakfast. Then, my mum begins to sort through the rubbish that my dad has collected.

The best bits are the things that can be recycled, so she puts them in one pile to sell. If there's anything useful, she puts that to one side – our house is made from all sorts of bits and pieces that other people have thrown away: planks of wood, large pieces of cardboard, bits of plastic sheeting, old strips of carpet... Any food that we find is fed to our pig, and whatever cannot be used (usually only a tiny part of the original pile) is burned. Me and my siblings usually have to help out a bit too. Sometimes it can be a bit dangerous – like the time my five year old brother cut his hand badly on

a broken glass bottle. But my mum took him to the Salaam Centre just up the road, where they cleaned his hand, put some medicine on it, and bandaged him up, telling him to be more careful in future.

We try to get out of doing work whenever we can, because it's more fun to play! There are lots of children in our community, and we play a lot of different games – it depends on what we can find to play with that day. Sometimes we kick a ball around; sometimes we play with the local stray cats and dogs; sometimes we make dollies from bits in the rubbish our dads bring home. As the oldest child in my family, I have to keep a special watch on my younger brothers and sisters and make sure they are playing with safe things. I often have to take broken bottles, mouldy food or dead rats from them, and I have to watch that they don't play too near the ongoing fires scattered around, or the open sewers. It is worst when it rains.

Each week, we get to go to the Salaam Centre. It is fun there. First we visit the nurse, who checks that we're healthy. Then we go into classes where the teacher shows us how to read and write. And at the end of the day, we get to play with the toys (they have a garden, with grass rather than rubbish

on the floor – and with swings!). But the best bit is at midday, when we have dinner. We usually have beans and rice, sometimes with a bit of chicken or some meatballs. We can even have seconds if we want – and once one of my brothers had a third helping! Our mum comes along to the centre too, and goes into a special class just for mums. Since she's joined that class, she makes us work harder at home, keeping it clean and tidy. We now sort the rubbish in a special area of the house, rather than scattering it all across the floor and having to collect bits that have rolled under the bed! We also have to wash our plates and cups after each meal, in separate water, and keep them up on a shelf rather than on the dirty floor. And she makes us wash our hands before we eat. It's all harder work, but our house is nicer to live in, and we don't seem to get as ill as we did before.

BibleLands gave the Salaam Centre a grant of £22,984 in June 2008, to help build and furnish the new Children's Activity Centre (which is where Mariam now goes to play with her friends). It is providing a safe and fun place for the children, as well as hygiene facilities and benefits over 8,000 children each year.

The Salaam Centre in Cairo serves the Zabaleen ('rubbish pickers') community, who live and work among the rubbish of the city. The centre runs education and healthcare programmes, including a special programme for children under fives who are treated for burns, cuts or other injuries that they get from the rubbish that they live and play in.

