

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

# GARBAGE DREAMS

BY MAI ISKANDER

[C] COMMUNITY CINEMA

Welcome to the world's largest garbage village located on the outskirts of Cairo, Egypt. The Zaballeen (Arabic for garbage people) recycle 80 percent of the trash they collect—far more than other recycling initiatives. But now a multi-national corporation threatens their livelihood. Follow three teenage boys born into the business who are forced to make choices that will impact the survival of their community.



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## FROM THE FILMMAKER

Born and raised in the United States, I would often visit my family's hometown of Cairo, Egypt. In my childhood memories, Cairo is a city of chaotic closeness. One minute, you are jostled by crowds of people pushing through the marketplace, accosted by the honking of cars and the barters of merchants. A moment later, you step into a familiar doorway to be grabbed, hugged tightly, and kissed six times on the cheek by a wise and warm grandmother.

In 2005, when I returned years later as an adult, friends of the family brought me to Mokattam, the garbage city on the outskirts of Cairo. Amid the crowded rooftops, goats, geese, and chickens all grazed on remnants of waste. Garbage was piled three stories high. Children played on a mountain of multicolored rags.

In the midst of it all – the dirt, the poverty, the smell of the garbage – was the humming of the recycling machine; the sound of a community-run Recycling School that had just opened. Their focus was to take their century-old recycling trade and turn it into a twenty-first century green job.

During my visit that year, I volunteered to help the students paint a mural at The Recycling School. I filmed a few of the teenage students applying vibrant colors and making whimsical pictures on a drab concrete wall, thinking that I could cut together a little film about their mural as a present for them.

In front of the camera, these amazing children blossomed. They were proud of their way of life and their history. And like typical teenagers, they wanted to show off their fashion sense, their workout routine and their music. These children always wanted to outdo each other.

We all became fast friends.

One of the boys who became a major subject in my film, Osama, started bragging to his friends that an "international film crew"

(in actuality it was just myself and my camera) was following him to document his incredibly charismatic self. Neighbors and friends immediately started calling him "Tommy Cruise."

I returned to Mokattam many times over the next four years, and I was always welcomed into their extraordinarily resilient and joyful community.

I filmed these fantastic teens daily, scavenging for tiny bits of cardboard and plastic. I was amazed by the hard, dangerous, dreary work of carrying and sorting garbage with their bare hands, and the hours spent breathing in the dust of the plastic granulators and fabric grinders, all while making a meager living from tiny bits of trash. Day after day, they would work diligently and proudly without complaint and without self-pity. With poverty all around them, they were always rich in spirit, filled with ambition and pride, and would never allow a visitor to even buy her own soda.

They work long into the night to clean up after us, the modern, industrialized world. Beyond that, by creating the world's most effective resource recovery system, they are actually saving our earth. From out of the trash, they lifted themselves out of poverty and have a solution to the world's most pressing crisis. Through their efforts, they have demonstrated the true value of trash and the real cost of throwing out the expertise of Zaballeen.

Meanwhile, my young friends were also growing up very quickly. Osama, the one-time happy slacker, was hoping to find and keep a good job. Adham wanted to modernize the recycling trade.

I hope that my friends follow their dreams.

I hope the bigger world will recognize that it is these dreamers who become leaders.

Mai Iskander



## THE FILM

Trucks piled high with huge bags of trash move slowly through dark, narrow streets. Pedestrians make their way through trash, scattered along these same streets. Buildings several stories high hold trash on every level, including the rooftops. This is Mokattam, the largest of Cairo's "garbage villages," which lie on the outskirts of the city and is the home of the Zaballeen of Cairo. Zaballeen is the word used for Egypt's "garbage collector" and the word in Arabic literally translates to "garbage people."

A metropolis of 18 million people, Cairo has no official waste collection system, and for decades the Zaballeen have provided this essential service, bringing the trash they collect to their communities, where it is then sorted. Paid only a minimal amount by residents for their garbage collection services, the Zaballeen survive by recycling 80% of everything they collect. They have transformed their Mokattam neighborhood into a busy recycling and trading enclave, where plastic granulators, cloth-grinders, and paper and cardboard compactors hum constantly.

Through the words and activities of three teenage boys, GARBAGE DREAMS describes the Zaballeen way of life, one that is characterized by strong community cohesiveness. In the village, everyone works in garbage and people are like one big family who know and understand each other. Here is where Adham, age 17, Nabil, age 18, and Osama, age 16, form their identities and their dreams for the future. In addition to having an apartment, getting married, and finding long-term companionship and respect, the young men would like to continue in the Zaballeen tradition of collecting and recycling trash. But the arrival of foreign private companies to do that work has undermined their dreams.

In an attempt to clean up Cairo city, Egypt awarded contracts to three foreign companies, one from Spain and two from Italy, to collect Cairo's garbage and dispose of it in landfills. They are required to recycle only 20 percent of the trash, compared to the 80 percent recycling rate of the Zaballeen. The foreign companies' presence means less trash for the Zaballeen to collect, less income from the small fees they receive for this service, and less recycled material to sell abroad—a major source of their income.

Laila, a community social worker and activist, tries to bolster the hopes and spirits of the Mokattam villagers at community meetings, where the men and women discuss their grievances and strategize ways to deal with the loss of their livelihoods. During home visits to check on the health and wellbeing of Mokattam's residents, she maintains an upbeat attitude, even though some, like Nabil's father, are pessimistic about the Zaballeen's prospects.

Another ray of hope in Mokattam is The Recycling School, where boys learn not only modern, safe recycling methods, but also literacy, painting, social drama, and computer and business skills. As students at the school, Adham and his friend Nabil have the opportunity to spend a week learning about waste management practices in Wales. Among other things, they learn that residents can sort their trash, an idea they hope to bring back to their city of Cairo. The Zaballeen embark on a trial project advocating waste segregation where the Zaballeen go door to door asking residents to sort their trash as they are throwing it away, placing organic waste such as leftover food in one container and all non-organic refuse such as cans, papers and plastics in another. However this pilot project pilot project in source separation goes awry because the foreign companies mix the trash together when they collect it.

No longer having the legal right to collect and sort trash, many unemployed Zaballeen wake up early to service residents before the foreign company's workers make their rounds collecting garbage. Others have resorted to illegal scavenging: roaming the streets of Cairo in search for high value recyclables.

Other Zaballeen go to work for the foreign companies; this includes Osama, who has not been able to hold any other job. However, the wages the foreign companies offer are substantially lower than what the Zaballeen had made before. In addition, the income the Zaballeen generated from their garbage pickup services only represented a small percentage of their income; most of their income came from the sale of recyclable materials. Some regard this capitulation as an act of disloyalty to the community, but to others it's a matter of survival. After several years, Adham, Nabil, and Osama have grown into manhood, still holding on to their dreams. But the prevailing mood among the Zaballeen is one of powerlessness, as they see their way of life disappearing.



## INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN GARBAGE DREAMS

**Adham** – A precocious 17-year-old, Adham is the family breadwinner while his father is in jail. He dreams of having his own recycling plant one day.

**Nabil** – A responsible, mature, hardworking 18-year-old.

**Osama** – A soulful and sensitive 16-year-old who can't seem to keep a job, and longs for respect.

**Laila** – A community social worker and teacher at The Recycling School.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Who are the Zaballeen?

The Zaballeen are mostly Coptic Christians who provide garbage collection cheaply or for free, making a living by sorting through the trash they collect, and recycling metal, plastic, paper, and glass and other materials. Food waste is given to the pigs and goats.

The Zaballeen live on the outskirts of Cairo, in Mokattam, the main setting for GARBAGE DREAMS. The garbage is collected by the men, and brought here where it is piled into large open rooms or sheds and sorted by the women and children. Families tend to specialize in sorting certain types of materials, such as glass or paper, and particular families take charge of preparing that material for recycling. It is estimated that the Zaballeen recycle about 80 percent of the solid waste they collect.

### The Recycling School

Mokattam's Recycling School (officially called the Mokattam Non-Formal Education Project) is a product of UNESCO funding and Proctor & Gamble-sponsored microloans. The project was prompted in part by Cairo's black market trade in Procter & Gamble products, in which empty P&G shampoo bottles were being refilled with inferior substitutes and sold as new. To get the discarded bottles off the streets, Procter & Gamble agreed to help fund The Recycling School so the community could learn how to recycle plastic.

The boys at The Recycling School learn how to sort and safely recycle plastic shampoo bottles. Through the process, children are taught the principles of recycling and the importance of safety precautions such as wearing suitable clothing, gloves, and masks.

Today, the school serves as a center where boys can learn about the business and economics of recycling. They learn safe recycling

practices, as well as literacy and the technical skills necessary to create and grow businesses: how to read maps, use computers, understand contracts, and operate machinery.

Adapted from <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=121855759600>

### Informal Recycling

In the developed world, most recycling activities are carried out by government entities, usually municipalities. In the developing world, however, recycling is largely done informally, by individuals or groups such as the Zaballeen in Egypt. The World Bank estimates that about 1 percent of the urban population in developing countries survives by reclaiming waste. These "waste pickers," or waste collectors, employ different methods in different places. Some salvage materials from dumpsters or trash containers on the street; some recover materials from waterways, open dumps or landfills; and some go door-to-door, purchasing all sorts of refuse from residents.

While these waste collectors are marginalized by their societies, they nonetheless perform a valuable service, both environmentally and economically. The work they do provides an income to unemployed individuals, supplies raw materials to industry, and reduces the need to use virgin resources. A growing number of cities in Africa, Asia, and South America are recognizing the importance of this work and encouraging the development of waste reclaiming enterprises and public-private partnerships to provide low-cost waste management.

### Waste collectors – Some facts & figures

- Dumpsite waste pickers in Mexico City have a life expectancy of 39 years, compared with 67 years for the general population.
- Estimates of the number of waste pickers living and working in Calcutta's municipal dumps is 20,000; in Manila, 12,000; and in Mexico City, 15,000.
- In Bangkok, Jakarta, Karachi, and Manila, scavenging saves each city at least \$23 million a year in imports of raw materials and reduced need for collection, equipment, personnel, and facilities.
- At the Beijing dump, scavengers earn three times the monthly salary of college professors.
- Scavengers in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico earn three times the minimum wage, putting them in the top 5 percent of income earners in that city.

Source: [www.wiego.org/occupational\\_groups/waste\\_collectors/Medina\\_Informal\\_Recycling.php](http://www.wiego.org/occupational_groups/waste_collectors/Medina_Informal_Recycling.php)



## Recycling in the Western world - A comparison of select countries

- Austria is the leading recycler in the European Union with about 60 percent of waste products being recycled.
- Only 10 percent of Greece's total waste is recycled and the remaining 90 percent goes to landfills.
- The amount of rubbish the UK recycles is estimated to be 17.7 percent.
- The United States recycles about 32 percent of its waste.
- In most parts of Switzerland throwing away rubbish costs money; each rubbish bag has to have a sticker on it, and each sticker costs at least one euro (about \$1.50).
- Of all the EU countries, Denmark sends the smallest proportion of its trash (less than 10 percent) to landfills.

## TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO GARBAGE DREAMS

A screening of GARBAGE DREAMS can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and can inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Waste management
- Recycling
- Environmental education
- Developing countries
- Egyptian/Coptic culture
- Urban poverty
- Community organizing/Labor organizing
- Economic development



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Why do you think a municipality or city would engage foreign companies to do garbage collection, instead of supporting its own local, informal workers?
2. When a developing country attempts to modernize its garbage collection, is using modern equipment and methods enough? What about the responsibilities of the citizens of the country? How can public education encourage responsible waste management?
3. Do modern business practices help or hinder recycling? In what way? What would it take to increase the level of recycling in the U.S. and other developed countries?
4. Do you agree or disagree that globalization has played a role in the Zaballeen's loss of livelihood? Why do you agree/disagree?

5. Watching the trash move by on a conveyor belt in the recycling plant in Wales, Adham says, "Here they have technology but no precision." What does he mean? Would it be possible, or even desirable, to separate every bit of recyclable material from mixed solid waste?
6. Compare the three boys in the film to American teenagers you know. What differences do you see? What similarities?
7. Do you think the trip to Wales was of any benefit to the boys who participated in it? Did it help Adham or Nabil to improve their situations? Or has it created false hopes? Explain your answer.
8. Do you think any of the young men in the film will realize his dreams? Why or why not?
9. Has seeing this film had any effect on your attitude toward recycling or your feelings about the amount of trash our society produces? If so, what effect has it had?



## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might take as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Organize a forum on waste collection and recycling in your community. Enlist the help of students to survey residents about their recycling activities and have them present their findings at the forum. Mount a waste reduction effort that includes a contest to identify ways that businesses, public agencies, and individuals can reduce the amount of garbage they produce and offer prizes for the best idea in each category.
2. Work with a civic association to organize a citizens' field trip to a local landfill and/or a recycling facility. Write a report on the findings of the field trip that can be distributed to the community or submitted as an article for the local newspaper. Become acquainted with landfill terminology by reading about landfills at  
<http://www.ejnet.org/landfills/>
3. If your community does not already have such a program, petition your local government to schedule quarterly or bi-annual hazardous waste collection days. Form a committee to establish guidelines and logistics, including publicity.
4. Find out how much you, your family and friends know about trash disposal. Take the landfill quiz at the end of the information sequence on this How Stuff Works website:  
<http://www.howstuffworks.com/landfill.htm>. Develop a family plan for reducing the amount of trash you produce. Include such things as purchasing habits and the reuse or repair of materials. For more ideas go to <http://myzerowaste.com>.
5. As the production of electronics continues at a brisk pace, the problem of electronic waste, or e-waste, is growing rapidly. Contact your elected officials to encourage continued debate and exploration of this issue and to express your concerns.
6. Learn how you can work with your employer or other organizations to eliminate waste. Visit Zero Waste Alliance's website ([www.zerowaste.org](http://www.zerowaste.org)) to find out about standards, tools and practices that can lead to a sustainable future. You can also get information on working with your community to eliminate waste by visiting Zero Waste's sister website, the Grassroots Recycling Network at [www.grrn.org/zerowaste](http://www.grrn.org/zerowaste). Here you'll find tools such as A Zero Waste Event Kit, A Citizen's Agenda for Zero Waste, the Zero Waste Briefing Kit and more.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [communitycinema.org](http://communitycinema.org). For local information, check the website for your PBS station.

## RESOURCES

<http://www.garbagedreams.com>—Explore the official GARBAGE DREAMS website.

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=121855759600>—Check out the GARBAGE DREAMS Facebook site, which provides a description of the Mokattam Recycling School.

### Zaballeen and Copts

<http://www.globalenvision.org/search/node/Zaballeen>—Global Envision works to alleviate poverty in an era of globalization. The site contains articles about the current condition of the Zaballeen.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/25/world/middleeast/25oink.html>—This New York Times article from May 2009 describes the recent attempts by Egypt to clean up Zaballeen neighborhoods.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4602185.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4602185.stm)—This 2005 BBC story describes the work of the Zaballeen and the pride they take in providing trash removal service.

<http://www.coptic-cairo.com>—Examine this interesting website featuring Coptic history and culture, developed by Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities.

### Cairo

<http://www.wordpress.org/newspapers/MIDEAST/Egypt.cfm>—Explore a comprehensive directory of Cairo-based newspapers and magazines

### Recycling, Landfills and Waste Reduction

<http://www.no-burn.org/>—GAIA (Global Alliance For Incinerator Alternatives) is a worldwide alliance of more than 500 grassroots groups, non-governmental organizations, and individuals in over 80 countries whose ultimate vision is a just, toxic-free world without incineration.

<http://www.sustainabilityed.org/>—Learn more about how to bring sustainability education to students. The Cloud Institute works to ensure that innovative curricula is available to educators in the K-12 school systems to prepare young people for the shift toward a sustainable future.

<https://www.recyclebank.com/>—RecycleBank partners with cities and haulers to reward households for recycling. Households earn RecycleBank Points that can be used to shop at over 1,500 local and national businesses.



<http://www.zerowasteamerica.org/>—Zero Waste America is an Internet-based environmental research organization specializing in the field of Zero Waste, which provides information on U.S. waste disposal issues and associated legislative, legal, technical, environmental, health and consumer issues.

<http://zunia.org/post/the-informal-recycling-sector-in-developing-countries-organizing-waste-pickers-to-enhance-their-im/>—Click on the title, “The informal recycling sector in developing countries: organizing waste pickers to enhance their impact” to read about the economic and environmental contributions made by the urban poor throughout the world.

[http://www.wiego.org/occupational\\_groups/waste\\_collectors/Medina\\_Informal\\_Recycling.php](http://www.wiego.org/occupational_groups/waste_collectors/Medina_Informal_Recycling.php)—Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. This article describes the economics, working conditions and public policies related to the work of waste collectors.

<http://www.benefits-of-recycling.com/recyclingstatistics.html>—This website provides information and statistics on recycling a vast array of materials, along with other useful environmental facts and figures.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4620041.stm>—This 2005 BBC News article, “Recycling Around the World,” provides comparisons of recycling among several EU countries.

<http://www.howstuffworks.com/landfill.htm>—Explore a detailed description of how landfills work.

GARBAGE DREAMS WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN APRIL 2010. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema).

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