

London copywriter scripts ‘Yalla Beirut’ plan to aid blast-hit people in Lebanon



Gemma Champ

MEHRE ALAM
DOHA

AS the Beirut port explosion rocked the picturesque country on August 4 killing at least 180 people, Gemma Champ’s heart ached for the people of Lebanon and their families beyond the scene of devastation. Nearly 3,457 km away (this is the shortest airline distance between Beirut and London), she wanted to act soon and provide succour to people living in “the most beautiful, vibrant, resilient, historical and exciting country I’d ever visited,” as she put it on her social media account.

The result of her efforts: ‘Yalla Beirut’!

Explaining the ‘Yalla Beirut’ drive, she wrote on her social media account: “Please donate to help them rebuild their glorious country again. I’ve done some new T-shirts, with all profits going to Impact Lebanon’s Disaster Relief Fund. Unisex and women’s cuts available, in multiple colours. All organic, sustainable sourced and ethically made. Please buy and share!”

When *Qatar Tribune* approached her to seek more details about her efforts, the copywriter based in London stated:

“I wouldn’t call this a campaign, so much as an expression of solidarity with the people of Beirut and Lebanon. Because I’m not trying to make money from the company, I’m able to do ‘not for profit’ T-shirts that hopefully send some funds to good causes.”

She went on to add: “When I saw what had happened in the beautiful Beirut, my heart absolutely broke for this wonderful city, and the whole country, which has so much to offer the world, but is always at the mercy of its neighbours.”

Of course, she donated immediately, but she knows how quickly events move on and are forgotten, so she wanted to do something more – a kind of call that would remind people regularly of Beirut. It needed to be positive, and full of hope, and instantly the word ‘Yalla’ came to her mind. “Whenever I was going somewhere or doing something in that region, ‘Yalla, let’s go!’ was a signal to stop procrastinating and start DOING,” she said.

IMPACT LEBANON

“The profits from the T-shirts are going to Impact Lebanon, which when I researched charities, seemed to be one that seemed to be most likely to di-

As part of her efforts, Gemma Champ has come up with T-shirts in multiple colours with unisex and women’s cuts. The profits are going to ‘Impact Lebanon’s Disaster Relief Fund’



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Gemma Champ

rect funds to the right places locally,” she added, in an email exchange with this writer.

Gemma, who lives with her Arabian Mau, Frankie, a rescue cat (She describes the cat as “a little bit of the Gulf in Hack-

ney!”), started a T-shirt company, The New Normal, when the UK locked down due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, “to find a way to respond to such a crazy and confusing time.”

“The one thing everyone

kept saying was, ‘This is the new normal’, but there was nothing normal about it! It’s not there to make money, but just to try to encapsulate the era.”

STRONG CONNECT

Gemma feels a strong connect with Lebanon, where she says, she has been to at least four or five times. “I absolutely loved it [Lebanon]. Growing up in the 80s and 90s in the UK, you have an image of Beirut as being a bombed-out wasteland, and when I finally got there in 2007, I truly understood why they called it the Paris of the Middle East. It’s a cliché to say, ‘the people are so friendly’, but they truly are incredible, helpful, creative, resilient, and above

all huge fun. I could see, of course, that while the commercial districts were having money lavished on them, there were many areas that needed help, but it felt like a very positive time in the country, with a real sense of hope.”

How has been the reception to her campaign for Beirut so far?

“Whenever you take a word from someone else’s language, there is a fear that you’re missing some nuance or getting it wrong, so I was a bit worried, but thankfully I’ve had really positive responses not just here but from Lebanese and Middle Eastern friends, former colleagues and strangers, so I’m hoping it’s hit the mark.

“I wouldn’t say it’s sold many, but that’s not its purpose really – if people want to send the £20 directly to a charity rather than the £4.17 that I can send from the T-shirt profit, that’s fine by me. I think, at least, it has resonated with people and given them a sense that they are not forgotten or ignored. But equally, I would love people to be wearing these T-shirts, which are ethically made and organic, for the next few years, so they are always reminded of the spirit of Beirut.”

DOWN MEMORY LANE

When asked about some unique memories of her time in Lebanon, she said, “Oh, so many...!”

“I think the first time I went was to interview Elie Saab at his studio. I stayed at the Mayflower in Al Hamra, and got this rickety shared taxi, in the blazing heat, but when I went into the atelier it was so chic and cool, with all the artisans calmly working away, surrounded by the mannequins of the rich and famous! It was a dream interview.

“Another time I went was for the opening of the Louis Vuitton store, and then a launch party, where Catherine Deneuve and Christian Louboutin were on the dancefloor with us.”

But perhaps even more cherished were the quiet moments – things like eating incredible regional Lebanese food at Beit Al Tawlet or queuing for shawarma at Baba, exploring the ancient ruins at Byblos and Baalbek, driving past the beautiful farmlands, wandering round the craft and fashion shops of Saifi Village, drinking coffee in a courtyard café, skiing, and more.

“Whatever Beirut is, it’s never, ever boring,” she summed up.



‘Murder attempt’: Lebanon protest wounds add to blast woes

AFP
BEIRUT

FIRAS and Zeina survived Beirut’s port explosion unscathed but still sustained severe injuries -- not in the disaster itself but in the heavy-handed crackdown on the street protests that followed.

Firas Hamdan, 33, a lawyer who was filming one demonstration, was hit in the heart by a lead pellet that surgeons have been unable to remove in an operation that has left a long scar down his chest.

Zeina, a 50-year-old mother-of-three, was also hit by such pellets that security forces were accused of firing from pump-action shotguns during the unrest, leaving her back pockmarked by the impact wounds.

“Some people lost their sight and others were hit with pellets, like I was in my heart,” said Hamdan. “This made us realise that we are not living in a normal country.”

In the chaotic days after the August 4 explosion, thousands of angry protesters rallied in Beirut against the official incompetence and corruption they blame for Lebanon’s worst peacetime disaster.

The public fury over the blast -- caused by a stockpile of ammonium nitrate that had languished in a warehouse for years, officials say -- reinvigorated a protest movement that had kicked off last year but since faded.

The protest sparked a heavy response in which security forces and plain-clothes personnel fired tear gas canisters, rubber bullets and shotgun pellets into the crowd, according to protesters and human rights groups.

The violent crackdown sent hundreds of bloodied demonstrators flooding into Beirut hospitals that were already overwhelmed by thousands of blast casualties and surging novel coronavirus cases.

Doctors reported that multiple protesters lost an eye



Anti-government activists take part in a ceremony to commemorate the victims of the massive Beirut’s port explosion of August 4 which killed at least 158 people, wounded 6,000 and displaced some 250,000 to 300,000. (DPA)

and told AFP the injuries from the latest demonstrations were the most severe they have seen since the start of the nationwide protest movement in October.

• ‘Shoot-to-harm’ -Hamdan, who for months has documented abuses against protesters, was broadcasting live on Facebook during an August 8 rally when the pellet hit him. He was rushed to hospital unconscious and taken into open-heart surgery, but the doctors could not extract the pellet.

“The doctor told me that removing it would kill me,” Hamdan said, speaking in his living room several days after his release from hospital.

Rights group Amnesty International said security forces, the army and men in civilian clothing fired rubber bullets and tear gas canisters “recklessly” into the crowd that day.

Pump action pellets were also fired “from an unidentified source,” leading to severe injuries, according to Amnesty, which said some 230 people were wounded on August 8 alone.



The protest injuries piled more trauma on a country already brought to its knees by the colossal port explosion that killed 181 people, wounded thousands more and laid waste to swathes of Beirut.

“There was a punitive shoot-to-harm use of force,” Amnesty said.

Zeina, who asked to use a pseudonym, said she considered the use of force against her a “murder attempt.”

She recounted how she was dodging tear gas during a protest near the parliament when she felt a sharp pain radiate across her back as lead pellets embedded themselves in her skin.

“I took two steps forward and then also felt pain down my arm” from another spray of pellets, she said. “Then I collapsed on the ground.”

A group of Lebanese doctors who have dubbed themselves “The White Coats” reported at least 60 severe injuries caused by rubber bullets and pellets fired directly into the crowd at chest level and close range.

Doctor Selim Nasser, a member of the group, told

AFP he was especially concerned about the pellets, which he had not seen security forces use before.

“They lead to severe injuries because they pierce and rupture the skin,” he said, warning also of longer-term consequences, such as lead poisoning.

Twenty of those hit by rubber bullets and pellets suffered eye injuries, according to the White Coats group.

Eight among them required surgery and at least three have lost sight in one eye, said ophthalmologist Nada Jabbour.

• ‘On the attack’ -Lawyers and rights groups have called for an investigation, and Amnesty judged that “the state seems to be on the attack against its population”.

Security forces and the Lebanese army have denied firing rubber bullets and other munitions at protesters, despite growing evidence.

Some have pointed at the parliamentary police, a unit that enjoys broad autonomy and had been repeatedly accused of using violent methods to suppress protests.

Imad Ammar, a lawyer with the Beirut Bar Association, has since October documented abuses against protesters as a member of a specialised committee. “We are in the process of filing legal complaints to the judiciary on behalf of the injured,” he told AFP, voicing hope this will help “expose the identity of attackers and hold them accountable”.

The lawyer said that pellet injuries were unheard of before the latest protests, charging that “they constitute an attempt to kill or harm and they violate the right to peaceful assembly”.

Back at his home, Hamdan said his near-death experience had only fuelled his anger against the authorities.

“In a month or so I will be back on the streets and I will raise the same demands,” he vowed. “But this time with more tenacity and conviction.”