



Derek James

How Father John's legacy lives on in Jerusalem

More than 13 years ago one of the most popular and charismatic priests ever to have served in Norwich and Norfolk collapsed and died while walking along Star Street in Bethlehem when working and living at a tough refugee camp.

But the memory of the man they still call "Father John" lives on and thanks to him young people are given something we take for granted... an education.

The Rev Canon Dr John Aves, vicar of St Giles in the city and a priest in the Norwich diocese since 1979, was due to return home to his wife Anne, sons Ben and Edmund, and his many friends and colleagues when he died at the age of 52.

John had been on a three-month sabbatical with a Quaker organisation helping vulnerable communities, monitoring and reporting human rights issues.

He had told me at the time: "Imagine living in Wymondham and not being allowed to go to school or work in Norwich. Just imagine."

Within his role he found he had the opportunity to live and volunteer in Dheisheh Palestinian Refugee Camp, the largest of the three camps in Bethlehem with more than 13,000 residents of

whom half are under aged under 24.

He made a huge impact with the local people and just before coming home he spoke of returning and was brimming with plans and ideas on how to improve life for the young people by helping to give them an education. Then he died.

His wife Anne explained: "When I visited the camp three days after his death with our sons. It made a lasting impression on us and we knew we would return.

"A parishioner in Norfolk has described John as a mixture of a rocket, banger, and firework, so we knew that anything set up in John's memory had to be a living dynamic project. Education seemed the obvious choice."

Thanks to Anne, Ben and Ed, the YMCA, and their many supporters – including the Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Rev Graham James – ten years ago the John Aves Education Project was established and to date it has raised more than £113,000 and helped to pay for 22 young people to get a university degree.

Subjects include medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, midwifery, computer engineering, journalism and so on.... subjects which can open up a whole new world for young people living in a



'Father John': Canon Aves, whose memory is still revered in the Holy Land. Pictures: FAMILY COLLECTION

very different world to the one we enjoy.

"We have developed a very close working relationship with community groups within Dheisheh and Al Quds University in East Jerusalem where 18 of the young people have studied," said Anne, who has worked so hard to made the project work.

"For the first nine years we were affiliated with Norfolk YMCA, and really appreciate all their support. In November 2016 we gained independent charitable status and at the end of April we heard we have been successful in securing £15,000 of funding from Quaker Peace and Social Witness," she added.

Anne, Ben and Ed were also guests of Palestinian leader, the late Yasser Arafat, who knew all about the good work of Father John.

Earlier this year a pilgrimage party, led by the Bishop of Norwich and his wife Julie, visited Dheisheh where young people, who had known Father John showed them around, and



Father John meeting young Palestinian Jijad.

they could see for themselves how well the project was working.

Education is a precious gift, and Father John's impact can be seen in two telling quotes from people he has helped.

Firstly, Aysa, who was one of the young boys in his class, and is now a man of 25. "There are three ways you can deal with the Occupation: suffering mental health issues, another is violence - the way I originally choose because I witnessed a friend die in my arms. Or education; Father John showed me the way was education."

And Khalid Al-Saifi, Director of

the IBDA community centre (Arabic for "to create something from nothing.") added: "Some people you know all your life and when they die, you forget them in a day. Some people you know for a very short time, but you remember them forever; that was Father John."

Celebrating the 10th year for JAEP will form part of the 5.30pm Evensong at Norwich Cathedral on Friday May 19. It's a time to remember the man they still call Father John. For more information about the project click on www.jaep.org.uk



Anne Aves of Norwich with Lalya, one of the young people the John Aves Education Project has help to educate at Al Quds University in East Jerusalem.