PEOPLE OF THE YEAR

MONICA HANNA

Connecting Egyptians with their heritage

By Kate Durham
T
hree days after the dispersal of pro-Mor-
si sit-ins, Dr. Monica Hanna was in the
looted Mallawi National Museum trying
to salvage antiquities when a youth came
in and started to smash items into even smaller pieces.
Hanna recalls that she tried to tell him he was destroy-
ing his own heritage, but he insisted, “No, this belongs
to the government, it’s not mine. It’s not for the people.”

“People revere museums, archeological sites as prop-
erty of the state where they’re not allowed to go,” says
Hanna, a 30-year-old Egyptologist and archeologist.
“They don’t feel an ownership of the place as a mu-
seum or the heritage that’s presented in the museum.”

Hanna, one of the most prominent voices in the
Egyptian Heritage Task Force (EHTF), wants to re-
connect Egyptians with their heritage and get them
involved in protecting it. “We are trying to create
communal watchdogs all around Egypt; not just on
ancient Egyptian heritage [but on] buildings, histori-
cal buildings, Islamic and Coptic monuments, every-
thing. […] So we’re creating a very large network of just
citizens who are very worried about their heritage.”

The task force, which Hanna describes as an “un-
derground movement,” has been working informally
since the 2011 Revolution to document threats to an-
tiquities sites, but only in the past year has it started
to operate as a formal organization. Officially, the
group has three Egyptian academics actively working
to confirm citizen reports, with another 12 Egyptian
and foreign academics in the network, “and a lot of
normal supporters,” Hanna explains. The EHTF has
a Facebook page, Egypt’s Heritage Task Force, but at
ehtf.org) was still under development. Task force
members are funding their efforts out of their own
pockets: “We have been insisting not to accept fund-
ing to keep our political affiliations clear.”

The group has won moral support from lawyers and
activists, with the Egyptian Center for Human Rights
hosting an EHTF press conference in September.
While the Antiquities Ministry is not providing official
support, Hanna says she’s had several meetings with
the minister to share information.

It’s this diverse support she credits with opening
doors at the ministry. “It’s the media attention, and
them feeling that I’m not alone. Because if they think
for a second that Monica Hanna is just a person and
not backed by all these supporters, then khalas, I’m
done for. They will not listen to me anymore. But they
know that she does not stand alone, that she represents
a very large group.”

While recognizing the role of poverty and orga-
nized crime in looting and encroachment, Hanna
feels the root cause is that Egyptians cannot identify
with the ancient cultures. “They don’t feel it’s part
of their heritage. Even the Egyptian social studies
schoolbook — the way it presents [Ancient] Egypt and
modern Egypt, [they are] two hermetically sealed en-
tities. There is no continuity.”

The problem has been compounded in the past 10
years by the push to promote Ancient Egypt to the West.
While the influx of tourists clamoring to see mummies
and pyramids has brought cash into the country, Hanna
admits, it has also created “this feeling that the archeo-
logical space is for tourists and foreign archeologists. It’s
not for Egyptians. This barrier needs to go away.”

One of the keys to removing that barrier is revamp-
ing the role of the Antiquities Ministry. Hanna says
that the ministry should be more active in promoting
Egyptian interest and research in the nation’s heri-
tage. She adds, “You need to change this whole idea of
policing the archeological sites by keeping the people
away into policing the archeological sites by getting
people involved.”

Until that day comes, the EHTF is doing what it can
to get people involved at the grassroots level. Hanna’s
long-term vision, modeled on the UK’s English Heri-
tage commission, is “a body that’s semi-governmental,
semi civil society that does the same work of the task
force but institutionally. […] You need a higher insti-
tution that monitors the work of the ministry as well as
the work of the Ministry of Endowments as well as
other institutions.”

It seems an optimistic goal, but Hanna is confident
they can make it happen: “Really, never underestimate
a group of citizens. They can change the world.” et