



## VERA'S STORY

Dreams are a wonder. They occupy a large portion of our thoughts to motivate us and give us something to hold on to, work towards, and hope that brightens up the darkest of days. At the same time, their tendency to be crushed transfers their fragility to us and can turn that hope into despair, anguish, and distress. Vera has many dreams; some of which are related to her family-owned bike shop. These dreams were promising and attainable from where she used to be - just a nice expansion, maybe including bicycle rentals in their list of services. Just taking what she already has and adding something more. But what happens when she no longer has that base to add to? What happens when she is sidetracked from chasing her dreams to scrambling to pick up the pieces of her broken reality?

Cyclo Sport has been around for more than thirty years and deals with everything bike related - from purchases of bikes and accessories to repairs and restorations. It survived the civil war, revolutions and protests, and past and present economic collapses. It survived every part of the store being obliterated on August 4<sup>th</sup> and turning into a dark haze of glass and chaos. It survived one of the owners – Vera's husband – being injured as he escaped this chaos.

Being the only source of income for a family of four, getting Cyclo Sport up and running was of utmost priority – second only to ensuring Vera's husband's recovery from his injuries. Their damaged house could wait, but Cyclo Sport could not. So, after getting Vera's husband the treatment he needed, they dove into their savings and started



salvaging what they could from the efforts and memories of the past thirty years. They worked their way outside in, fixing the windows and the door before going over their stock and products. It was like starting from scratch, like the past thirty or so years never even happened. Months passed and there was no income for the family. Despite working overtime, they were barely able to restore what they had lost but being motivated by their customers and the need to provide for their children ensured that they would not give up. During this time, some of Beirut's roads were inaccessible to cars, so people who were volunteering to help with the aftermath of the blast had to do so on bikes. Often, they would pass by to get some repairs done and to give heartening encouragement to Vera and her husband. Despite working exclusively on trivial things, they decided to open as soon as possible and provide their services in an effort to encourage others to do the same. In the beginning, they did most of the work alone, relying on their own pockets and efforts for restoration. That was until they finally contacted Khaddit Beirut and received support that strengthened their resolve to continue.

There is a significant difference between where they are now and where they were a year ago right after the blast. It was not easy to put in all this effort just to barely be back where they started. Unfortunately, the challenging days are not over. With all bikes and accessories being imported from abroad, the consequent dollarized prices provide quite a struggle. A fluctuating exchange rate makes losing money when purchasing at a higher rate and selling at a lower one a common occurrence for Vera. Furthermore, sometimes there are simply no products to pay for, as suppliers do not have them or are just refusing to sell. The fuel crisis also played its role in Cyclo Sport's



survival. Firstly, it increased their frustrations of driving around, wasting scarce gas, just to come back empty handed from suppliers. On the consumers' side, the fuel crisis encouraged some to shift to bicycles instead of cars. Unfortunately, the dollarized prices pulled the brakes on this shift in some cases, as a seemingly cheap bicycle priced in dollars was now a fortune in Lebanese lira. Instead, some people decided to scour their basements and pull out their discarded bikes to reuse and restore with the help of Cyclo Sport. It was all little things, but these little things added up to the bigger picture of their survival.

Vera is still holding on to her dreams. Even though those dreams were just at the tip of her fingers and now they seem impossibly out of arms reach, she is still motivated and hopeful. As someone who has experienced every milestone of her life in Lebanon, leaving is not an option. Giving up is not an option. Succumbing to the despair, distress, and anguish is not an option. To call the past year or so difficult is an extreme understatement. We lost too much. But, as Vera strongly insists, this is our country, and all this pain and effort will not just go in vain. We will continue until we are standing up even sturdier than before. We will continue to dream. We will continue to chase our dreams.