“33 years passed out of memories with no purpose in life. I was totally depressed. My family kept me hidden from the outsiders, and I barely left the house a couple of times in my whole life; but recently, everything has changed. I now have a social life, friends who support me, and I even explored my hobbies, where I currently perform expressive dancing with a newly founded group in my village”, said Hasan Jabareen, a young man born with hydrocephaly and paraplegia.

Eighteen months ago, a group of young volunteers visited Hasan at home in Al-Thahrieh village in the south of the Hebron district. They persuaded him to come out independently and explore new opportunities. “Out of shame and fear of being disabled, my family didn’t let me out during the past 33 years. I didn’t study, work or anything else, but those new friends didn’t give up,
they came to me over and over again, until I was encouraged to take part in their activities”, Hasan expressed happily.

The group is called “Country Youth” and was founded in 2013 by BASR’s CBR Program. It includes around 100 members, comprising persons with disabilities and their supporters. They’re acting as a self-help group in their local community, organizing awareness-raising and recreational activities, as well as lobbying local institutions to make public facilities accessible to persons with different types of disabilities, advocating the rights of persons with disabilities and promoting their inclusion and full participation in community life. They also render home visits to encourage persons with disabilities to come out of the vicious circle of isolation and exclusion and overcome attitudinal barriers.

BASR’s team regularly provides this self-help group with capacity building and training to empower them and develop their communication, negotiation networking, planning and advocacy skills to become strong self-advocates who can make their voices heard at all levels. “In mid 2013, I participated, with other members of the group, in a five day training on “organizational and management skills” organized by BASR which helped us become more organized in planning our activities”, said Iyad - one of the group members born with a dislocated hip. “In our village, there was no priority for disability issues on the part of the municipality and civil society institutions, so we had to plant the first seed for a better future for persons with disabilities”, he added.

With BASR’s support, the self-help group organized awareness raising, social and recreational activities targeting persons with and without disability, produced and performed a play that simulated negative societal attitudes and inappropriate language used against persons with disabilities, in addition to various advocacy initiatives eg., banners and bill boards with different slogans demanding the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities and the promotion of their inclusion in society on equal footing with other citizens.
The most outstanding initiative of the group is the weekly radio program called “The Country is Yours and Ours”, broadcasted in the local radio station of Al-Thahrieh, to raise people’s awareness on disability issues and rights in Al-Thahrieh village.

The group also succeeded in lobbying the municipality to offer them an appropriate venue for their meetings and activities. “In cooperation with the municipality, we began carrying out small projects, such as building a ramp in a primary girls school that includes one pupil with physical disability, who could not reach her class easily”, said Iyad.

With their energy and belief in improving lives of people with disability, they were also able to build new connections with some international partners, such as a theatre called “I Can Move” from Denmark, where 5 members of the self-help group participated in a 30 day training on expressive dancing. “For the first time ever, I decided to not just get out of my house alone, but also to travel to Ramallah by myself; and at the end of our intensive training, I stood up in front of hundreds of audiences, who came to see me and my fellow actors performing expressive dancing at Ramallah Cultural Palace”, said Hasan excitedly.

“I feel we became the voice of persons with disabilities in our village; and the Mayor started mainstreaming disability issues in every new project he conducts, including the new accessible stadium that is under construction, instructing the architects to take the accessibility standards into consideration in their designs”, commented Iyad with confidence.