“Just ask Ageleh—she’ll know.” This is a common phrase heard around the Temple of the Winged Lions archaeological site in Petra, Jordan.

Ageleh Al Jmeidi is in many ways the matriarch of the site that has become home to a USAID SCHEP grant that helps train local community members in archaeological conservation and preservation, with the ultimate aim of providing sustainable economic opportunities.

USAID SCHEP currently works at five cultural heritage sites across Jordan located in underserved communities.

In the communities surrounding Petra, it is often difficult for women in particular to find work to support themselves and their families. Those who do work outside the home are relegated to selling tourist trinkets inside Petra. At the Temple of the Winged Lions project, things run a little differently.

The project uses a gender-blind hiring system that extends opportunities for employment to all, not just those with the right connections. Further, it uses a publicized and unified wage scale to ensure equity among all of its employees. Over the course of the project’s lifespan it has created more than 800 employment opportunities and trained more than 400 members of Petra’s host community in vocational skills. More than 60% of those trained are women and 75% have been youth under the age of 30.

Ageleh puts a face to those statistics. A mother of six, she was able to provide for and even send two of her children to college on the money she earned working at the temple. “There was no money before. We just sat at home and waited,” she says, her eyes not looking up from the pottery she is cleaning.

Through the project, which has also been funded by the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation since 2012, Ageleh has learned to clean, sort, and identify pottery, sift through excavation spoil heaps, and create and fill the sandbags used in other areas of the project. She’s a mother to all the other members of the team, and with each new batch of trainees that USAID SCHEP is supporting, she is happy to pass on her wisdom and experience.

USAID SCHEP seeks to support the success of the Temple of the Winged Lions and expand their model across Jordan to allow people like Ageleh to receive trainings that translate directly to employment opportunities and create long-term jobs and real community development.