

A Unique Experience: One Perspective of “Creating a Community: The Casablanca-Kennesaw Project”

Erin Cortner^(*)

In the beginning of the fall semester 2009, my last term in college for my bachelor's degree, two of my professors approached me to be part of an oral history project funded by the Museums and Community Collaboration Abroad grant, sponsored by the U.S. State Department and sponsored by the American Association of Museums. They explained that there were two teams, one from Kennesaw State's Museum and the other from the Ben M'sik Community Museum in Casablanca, Morocco. Each team would focus on a different topic. The Kennesaw State team would be examining Muslim life in the South region of the U.S., while the Ben M'sik team would interview members of their community to understand the history of the neighborhood.

I decided immediately to be a part of the team for a number of reasons. My first instinct is never to turn down an opportunity to gain more experience in any aspect of Public History. Once I decided on Public History as my career choice, I have taken every opportunity to learn more about the field, and I consider oral histories to be one of the more interesting aspects of this discipline. In addition,

*. Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, United States of America.

having done one oral history before this project, I knew I would enjoy the chance to hear people's personal stories.

The opportunity to learn more about Islam and the Muslim experience in America also inspired me to join this project. Islam is a subject that has been widely discussed in the U.S. in recent years but with little consideration of more than one perspective. There is so much misinformation, and I was one of those Americans who did not take the time to educate myself about Islam. I never really believed that all the stereotypes portrayed in the media could be true but I also did not take the time to learn more. I wanted to be a part of the project so that I could gain more information on my own about Islam and personal perspectives from Muslims.

When the project first began, I was not sure what I would get from it by the end. The preliminary meetings and research had to be completed before we could begin the oral histories, and for a while I was unsure of the direction the project would take. In the end, I could not imagine how satisfying the entire project would be. All of my initial goals were met. From the individual research, team meetings, and interviews I feel as if I learned much more about Islam than I could have on my own. I really began to understand Islam as a religion and its broad appeal.

Before the start of this project I had very little information about Islam, and I found that I was not alone. Many of the surveys we conducted revealed that our audience was equally ill-informed. I had never met a practicing Muslim, and any information I received about the religion was scarce. I had, of course, heard a lot about Islam through the media but I never believed the stereotype that it was a violent religion filled with terrorists. Yet, I had never taken the time to educate myself about the tenets of Islam, its daily practice, and its rich history. I thought that Islam primarily existed in the Middle East because that was the place I most often heard associated with the religion. September 11th has certainly shaped this debate in the United States, and not necessarily for the better. I heard a lot about how violent Islam was and how abusive Muslims were to women. Honestly, I was not really sure what to believe, but I knew that it was my responsibility to discover more. My intellectual laziness was challenged by this project.

By the end of this project, my perception of Islam was revised in some important ways. I know more about the history and practice of Islam, and I have been able to conclude for myself that Islam is peaceful at its core just like other religions. Every faith has flaws, and Islam should not be judged solely on theirs.

It is not perfect but neither is any religion. Certainly the assumption that Islam is by nature violent is incorrect. While I have learned a great deal, I do not consider myself fully educated on Islam. I know I have more to learn, and this project has inspired a new curiosity.

In addition, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I had to conduct oral histories for the project. Having the chance to interview people taught me that everyone has an important story to tell. What really surprised me was how much I enjoyed listening to the interviewees and how easy it was to connect with people whom I had never met. Some of their stories were so personal, and it amazed me how much they would open up in these interviews. I was humbled by the honesty of the interviews. The intense expression of emotion as they told about their life experiences is what made me able to connect to them and, in a way, what helped me see Islam in a much more positive light. I feel even more privileged because I helped transcribe the interviews. This was particularly interesting because even though I could not be present at all the interviews, I was able to hear more of the stories.

As much as I enjoyed the interviews with the Muslim American community in Northwest Georgia, I feel that one of the biggest benefits with this project is the relationships I made with fellow team-members from Morocco. My contact with them was not too frequent until they came to visit Atlanta. I only spent one week with them but I hope the relationships I made will last. The travel was one of the great benefits of this project. I did not get to go to Morocco with my team, but I did have the opportunity travel to Washington, D.C. when the Moroccan delegation was in the United States. Surprisingly, it was my first trip. That may seem like a small benefit, but I really enjoyed watching the reactions of our Moroccan friends engage with the monuments and museums. I was so happy to see how much they enjoyed everything; it was really inspiring.

This project also had the added benefit of helping my career. Any experience that teaches me new skills will certainly be useful as I grow as a historian. I now have more of an understanding about conducting and organizing oral history interviews as well as the possible technical difficulties that can occur. This will make it easier for me to perform oral histories in the future. In addition, this project has helped me establish and build connections with professionals in the field of Public History and related disciplines. I also believe that the relationships with my Moroccan colleagues is valuable both professionally and personally. In the end, my involvement with this project has contributed many important aspects to my future career.

This project also taught me many valuable lessons. I think about the project in several phases: the research and preparation of the interviews, the interview process, the Moroccan delegation's visit to the U.S., and our trip to Washington, D.C. In the first phase, I was primarily responsible for research and independent study in preparation for the upcoming oral histories. The background information and assignments the professors provided were helpful but it was still difficult to see the big picture of the project and its goals. Everything sped up as soon as we began the oral histories, including how much I learned about Islam. Its one thing to read about Islam and the people who follow it but it made a much bigger difference to me to hear it from Muslims who have a better understanding and could articulate what Islam means to them. I will always be grateful for what I learned from this particular part of the project.

Another valuable lesson I learned is to always be prepared for technological difficulties. It is essential to test equipment before using it and make sure that everyone who will be using it knows how everything works. For the most part, everything with the project went well but there were a couple of unanticipated problems. Sometimes the microphone on the tape recorders was not able to pick up people's voices. There were also times when the interviewees did not want to be videotaped, but did not mind the audiotape. Also, several of the videos did not record, so we lost a few of the interviews. None of the problems could have been expected but the issues we encountered will be useful in preparation for future projects and being more aware of what could go wrong.

By the time the Moroccan delegation arrived in Atlanta, I was extremely excited to meet them. Having not been one of the people who visited Morocco I was happy to finally meet members of our team in person. As excited as I knew the Kennesaw team was for the Moroccans to arrive, I did not think about how happy they were to be here. Only one of the delegates, Professor Samir el Azhar, had been the U.S., so for everyone else it was new. What I learned from the Atlanta portion of their visit is to be more aware of our visitors and observe what they enjoy as well as trying to meet their needs but, most importantly, to work as a group. It took the cooperation from all of us to make their visit successful. Having this observation made the entire experience easier.

One of the most difficult parts of the project came while we were in Washington. For a brief period my colleague Allison Lester and I were placed in charge of the group and had to escort them to some of the museums. This proved more difficult than anticipated but also an excellent learning experience. I learned a

lot about managing a group of people—which mainly means that you have to be ready for anything. It was not easy to keep up with everybody, especially when everyone wants to try something different. There has to be compromise and some form of command. I have to admit, it was much easier when my professors were in charge. But, I do believe that we managed just fine. This taught me the importance of planning, leaving some room for negotiation, and staying on schedule as much as possible in order to get everything done. One of the reoccurring themes of their entire visit from the Moroccan delegation was that there was never enough time to do everything. There was so much to see and do, and I hope that their visit encourages them to come back.

My favorite part of the delegation’s visit to Atlanta was our trip to the Atlanta History Center. I felt there was a real interest in the history of the South from our visitors. They saw many of the permanent exhibitions, but also enjoyed a wonderful temporary exhibit of African American photography. I enjoyed sharing our history with our delegates and appreciated their keen interest and knowledge of American history.

When we arrived in Washington D.C., I gained a new respect for the project as a whole. I enjoyed visiting the U. S. Capitol with the Moroccans. I could tell that they were extremely happy to be there and since I had never been there myself, we were able to experience the excitement together. While in Washington, all of us attended a meeting with the other project teams who were part of the MCCA grant. The other teams’ experiences made me both sad and grateful. None of them had enjoyed the same success we had with our project, and because of the volcano, we were the only team that had an international delegation with us. I would have hoped that they would not have had so much trouble making connections with museums in other countries or meeting their goals but it definitely made me appreciate everything the Kennesaw team achieved with our teammates in Morocco.

When this project began I could not have imagined how much I would learn from this experience and how rewarding it would be. My new understanding of Islam and Muslims in the U.S., I feel, has made a definite impact on my life. Overall, my experience in the MCCA project was exciting, enjoyable, and, at times, stressful. I could not have imagined when I began this project how much I would gain. I gained professional experience, but I also gained friendships and cultural exposure. For this, I am most grateful. The project and the work I had to do were not always easy but the most valuable experiences never are.

