

Introduction

The Museums and Community Collaboration Abroad Project

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The Museum and Community Collaborations Abroad Grant program, which is funded by the U. S. State Department and administered by the American Association of Museums (AAM) has two primary goals—to increase the knowledge and understanding of communities in the U.S. and abroad through collaboration between museums, and for museums to develop “replicable models for international collaboration that reach beyond their physical walls to directly engage members of their communities.” Our project team, which consisted of students, faculty, and staff from the museum (MHHE) at Kennesaw State University (KSU) in Kennesaw, Georgia, and the Ben M’sik Community Museum (BMCM) at Hassan II University in Ben M’sik/Casablanca, sought new ways to engage with our local communities in the Atlanta metropolitan area and the Ben M’sik neighborhood. The primary mechanism through which we carried out this project was through conducting oral history interviews with members of our local communities—a process that broadened our constituencies, provided eye-opening cultural exchanges, and laid the groundwork for a whole host of

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new programs. The project grew out of a partnership between the BMCM and the MHHE that began in 2007.

The Ben M'sik Community Museum (BMCM), the Muslim world's first "community museum," was founded in 2006 by the faculty in English and American Studies in Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Hassan II University, Ben M'sik/Casablanca. Of the fewer than 20 museums in Morocco, this is one of two located in Casablanca. The BMCM focus as a center of community engagement is expressed in its mission, which is "to preserve memory by interpreting, exhibiting, and promoting the stories and heritage of the diverse populations of the neighborhood and its region." The MHHE, which began in 2003, initially focused on World War II and the persecution of Jews and other minorities by the Nazi regime. The primary audiences were KSU students, faculty, and staff, and K-12 students in the region. In 2008, its mission was expanded to include promoting greater cultural awareness, tolerance, and diversity. The relationship begun in 2007 between the two institutions resulted in a jointly created, bilingual exhibition in 2009 about the neighborhood of Ben M'sik. From there, we sought to develop a more broad-based project that built on the existing relationship and expanded the outreach by both museums into their surrounding communities.

The Ben M'sik campus of Hassan II University is located in the heart of the working-class Ben M'sik neighborhood in Casablanca, but the university had not engaged with the surrounding neighborhood in any meaningful way. Although the BMCM was created to preserve and interpret the heritage of the surrounding community, the diverse and fluid nature of Ben M'sik, a neighborhood of more than one million people, and real and perceived barriers between the neighborhood and the university limited interaction between the two communities.

At KSU, the MHHE provided a solid foundation for the development of a relationship with K-12 schools in the area. Exhibitions and programs offered teachers, students, and community members opportunities to broaden their understanding of World War II and its horrors. As the museum broadened its mission to emphasize greater cultural awareness, tolerance, and diversity, the growing (75,000+) but largely misunderstood Muslim community in the greater Atlanta area seemed like a logical constituency to which the museum might appeal. This project provided the support, energy, and opportunity to allow both museums to build bridges into these underserved communities and, in the process, to strengthen our existing relationship.

“Creating Community Collaboration” was based upon the notion that extended conversations are the most meaningful exchanges between people. Such conversations change the perspectives of the participants, dispel stereotypes, correct misinformation, and remind us that trust comes slowly and must always be earned. We invested time and energy into making those conversations possible. To do that, both museums reached out and listened to each other as museum professionals, and, as importantly to their local neighbors as the resident experts. The oral history project was the fundamental building block of project. The “Coffee and Conversation” programs showcased what was learned from the oral histories for a public audience. The museums and their respective communities now face the challenge of ensuring sustainability. In that vein, the first project to result from the gathering of the oral histories will be the production of a documentary about the partnership.

The goal of the project was to share information. For the MHHE team, we focused on engaging an audience in Georgia that is largely uninformed, or ill-informed, about Islam. The BMCM team focused on showcasing the diversity of Moroccan cultures, while helping to promote new knowledge about the diversity of within a single neighborhood in Casablanca. The first step toward attaining this goal was an effort to change the attitude of the neighborhood communities about their respective museums and to change the behavior on the part of the two university museums to have them interact with and embrace these neighborhood communities. The ensuing exchange between the two museums and their communities ultimately led to increased knowledge about each other’s culture and traditions and a heightened sense of community engagement. The outreach process used in this project presents a replicable model for other university-based museums in many countries, which was a goal of the grant.

Our Purpose

The purpose of this oral history project was not merely to cultivate new visitors for the two museums, but to create a vehicle by which residents living near the museums can have extended conversations about topics relevant to their lives and the history of their neighborhood, community, or city. This dialogue helped both museums change the way they engage with and represent community history by relying upon local voices instead of broad assumptions and stereotypes.

Though our project has unique features, other oral history projects focused on the Muslim community inside and outside the United States have provided inspiration and ideas. For example, the Documentation Center of Cambodia completed “Promoting Genocide Education and Reconciliation through Oral History: The Case of Cham Muslim Youth in Cambodia” in 2008. Filmmaker Nsenga Knight conducted oral histories with Sunni Muslim women in Brooklyn in 2007 for a project entitled, “As the Veil Turns: Female Pioneers of the American Muslim Community.” Dr. Ken Scholl, of the history department at the University of Memphis, conducted “Integration through Education: Muslims of Memphis and America.” The Teachers College of Columbia University recently published *Where I Need To Be: Oral History of Muslim Youth in New York City*. The Oral History Association organized a panel around a film, “An Oral History of Islam in Pittsburgh” at the 2008 meeting. Each of the above projects represents an important effort to engage with Muslim communities and dispel myths and stereotypes about those communities. However, none of these projects sought to work in an international and collaborative context.

For decades scholars have argued that traditional concepts of what a museum is and how it should operate should no longer be left to the discretion of an elite few. Energized by these debates, museum constituencies have begun to claim that they should take an active role in deciding how museums interpret individual and community experiences (Catherine Lewis, “From Temple to Forum” in *The Changing Face of Public History*, DeKalb: UNIP, 2005, 5). With this in mind, this project sought to gather, analyze, and learn from the voices of lived experience and give those individuals a chance to shape the way their history is told. We explored new territory on both continents and believe that the structure and outcomes of this project make it a replicable model for other museum-community partnerships.

Project Background

Of the less than 20 museums in Morocco, the BMCM is one of two located in Casablanca. The BMCM is unique in its focus as a center of community engagement. Unlike traditional museums that primarily collect and display antiquities and great works of art, the BMCM specifically seeks to document the day-to-day lives of local residents.

Ben M’sik is the largest, poorest, and most densely populated of Casablanca’s six districts. It has long been considered a “holding room” for suc-

cessive waves of migrants—most recently from the drought-stricken Chaouia and Doukala regions of Morocco. The cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of this neighborhood, where such differences are echoed in the Arabic, Berber, and French languages spoken by its residents, underscores the need for a shared space of representation that is simultaneously a gathering place where different voices and views might be understood. Since the 1980s, the local government has recognized the needs of this vast and complex community and has worked to improve social conditions by establishing cultural and social institutions in the area. The inaugural exhibitions at the BMCM, housed in the 1,000 square foot gallery at the university, have proven very popular. A traveling exhibit, co-curated by representatives from the BMCM and the MHHE at Kennesaw State University in 2008, was the first exhibition that focused solely on neighborhood history.

The MHHE began in 2003 as HEP when KSU accepted a traveling exhibit on the life of Anne Frank. Originally based in the Department of History and Philosophy in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University (KSU), the HEP served the university community and local schools interested in World War II and the persecution of Jews and other minorities by the Nazi regime. Following the departure of the Anne Frank exhibit and the installation of two new permanent exhibits, *Parallel Journeys: World War II and the Holocaust* and *V for Victory: Georgia Remembers World War II*, the HEP was renamed the (MHHE). A stable of traveling exhibits on related topics including the Tuskegee Airmen, European Gypsies who were persecuted by the Nazis, and political cartoons from World War II complement the permanent exhibits, and special events, including guest speakers, a film series, a summer institute, and assorted musical programs allow the museum to reach a broad audience.

Now part of a larger department, Museums, Archives & Rare Books, the MHHE expanded its mission to a more inclusive emphasis on promoting greater cultural awareness, tolerance and diversity. The fears and ignorance that generated the genocide of 70 years ago did not end with that war; hardly a corner of the world today is free of the crippling prejudices that prevent us from reaching our full potential as global citizens, including the corner occupied by northwest Georgia. For example, since September 11, 2001, the Muslim community has become a target of hatred in the United States. The MHHE would like to do more to create the conditions that will prevent hate-filled actions and attitudes in our community.

The MHHE is located in Cobb County, Georgia, with a majority population that is relatively conservative in its politics and religion. Predominately Christian, residents are somewhat conflicted in their attitudes about Islam. On the one hand, the county's only mosque is located next door to the Back to Bible Church, in a residential area where the neighborhood association leader has said, "I want to make it abundantly clear here that we are delighted to have them [the mosque] in our area." (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 01/14/2009). On the other hand, Cobb County was the defendant in a case decided by the U.S. Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals in October 2008, for deliberately omitting Islamic clergy (and others) from the list of prayer leaders who open every County Commission meeting (Pelphrey vs. Cobb County).

At KSU, more than 100 countries are represented in the student body and the university is recognized as a leader in international education among the 35 schools of the statewide university system. The College of Humanities and Social Sciences offers majors and/or minors in African and African Diaspora Studies, Asian Studies, Latin American Studies, and International Affairs along with many other programs that focus on cultural and regional studies; student organizations representing these and a wide array of international interests actively foster an atmosphere on campus that is unusually cosmopolitan for a university in a suburban setting. Much more could be done, however, to encourage dialogue among these groups, provide an outlet for their voices, and end the gulf of silence that exists between some of them. This philosophy guided the ongoing dialogue between the MHHE and BMCM.

The relationship between the two universities dates from 2005, but the partnership between the BMCM and MHHE is still young. In February 2007, faculty and staff from KSU and the MHHE led a series of workshops for the interdisciplinary BMCM advisory board comprised of more than a dozen Hassan II faculty from multiple disciplines, undergraduate and graduate students, and regional political leaders. The resulting plan from this week-long series of goal-setting workshops (conducted at times in English, Arabic, and French) focused on refining the BMCM's mission, professionalizing operations, and developing interpretive and strategic plans. This initial planning process produced an important result. Municipal officials in Casablanca announced that the government would construct a building to house the expanded community museum on public land in the heart of the Ben M'sik district, directly across from the neighborhood mosque, to be completed by 2011. As planning for the new space began, the

international project team developed the first traveling exhibition, *Ben M'sik: Creating Community in Casablanca*. It opened at KSU on April 1, 2009, at KSU and now travels throughout Morocco.

The workshops and traveling exhibit helped the various team members in Morocco and the United States build friendships, learn about the traditions of museums in each country, and understand how to present social history in a meaningful way in two languages for different audiences. The exhibit was a critical first step toward a successful partnership but mainly focused on the MHHE exporting its expertise. Without this MCCA opportunity, the two museums would have likely celebrated the exhibit's success and then returned to their respective agendas. Instead, both partners strengthened their relationship through an enterprise that encouraged a mutual sharing of expertise. That was the impetus for this current project.

Challenges

The BMCM and MHHE requested MCCA funding to begin to solve a very real problem faced by both institutions. The BMCM was looking for creative, sustainable, and meaningful ways to engage the diverse working-class neighborhood in which the museum functions. Many Hassan II students live in Ben M'sik, but most residents of the community are largely excluded from the campus and by extension the museum. The BMCM's current facility is mainly off limits to outsiders, situated within a walled university campus.

The MHHE was tackling a different challenge. Though situated on an open campus with easy access from a major interstate highway in a large metropolitan area, the museum had not directly engaged its population of Muslim students and faculty within the university's population of 25,000. Engagement with Muslim community members in the metropolitan area was on a limited basis, often surrounding a special event. Global learning and outreach were a core value at KSU, but the university was not meeting this challenge with one of the fastest growing and most misunderstood groups in the area. The MCCA project helped both museums address these underserved communities. Along the way, we developed a cadre of well-trained oral historians, ate a lot of great food, and broadened our understanding of each other's culture. The collaboration between the museums enhanced the outcome of the project far beyond what it would have been had each museum undertaken the project alone.

The role of each partnering museum focused on a collaborative model. We used the term collaboration with deliberation and care. Most museum-community outreach projects are more a matter of coordination or cooperation. In contrast, collaboration requires a sharing of authority that positions members of the community as active participants. We did not have an overly romantic notion of giving “power to the people” and abandoning expertise; instead both museums sought to engage and address the needs and expectations of disparate communities in the face of potential conflict, disagreement, even possible failure. Without such a perspective, we would likely only bring about temporary innovations in our operations or outlook, but never real change.

Project Deliverables and Activities

Both the BMCM and MHHE are young museums that were formed with community outreach as a core component of their mission. Yet neither museum had engaged in an extended community-based endeavor until this opportunity. “Creating Community Collaboration” is a project of discovery that bridged cultural and socio-economic divides through dialogue. It included the following activities:

Each museum (BMCM and MHHE) assembled a project team. The BMCM team was comprised of Hassan II undergraduate and graduate students in English and/or American Studies and faculty/staff members affiliated with the BMCM advisory board. The MHHE team was comprised of undergraduate American Studies and/or Public History students and faculty/staff members affiliated with the Museum of History and Holocaust Education and its advisory board.

Each project team participated in two workshops (via video teleconference) focused on conducting oral histories in a community museum setting led by faculty, staff, and students from KSU and Hassan II. The first session was an orientation to the project. The second session covered both the theoretical and practical issues involved in conducting oral histories. The BMCM Coordinators shared their experiences with collecting 20 oral histories in Ben M’sik that served as primary research for the museum’s first traveling exhibition Ben M’sik: Creating Community in Casablanca.

Each team planned and conducted 30 interviews. The interviewees were selected with attention to diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, profession, level of education, and other factors.

A delegation from the MHHE team travelled to Morocco in December 2009.

Throughout the interviewing process, the BMCM and MHHE partners engaged in an online discussion board about challenges and discoveries that arose during the interviewing process.

The project teams participated in additional video teleconference workshops to share lessons learned by the faculty and students from the BMCM as well as the MHHE group that traveled to Morocco.

Leading up to the field collection phase in Atlanta, the MHHE project teams coordinated outreach into the Muslim community (approximately 75,000 residents in the metro area) through contacts with the KSU Muslim Students Association, mosques, organizations, and associations in northwest Georgia. A topic that was mutually beneficial to the community and museum, “Muslim Identities in the American South,” was selected for the oral history project. We worked with a number of organizations, including the Istanbul Center, the Emory Muslim Student Association, and the Masjid Al –Farooq Mosque to identify interviewees for the project.

Five team members from the BMCM visited the MHHE and the United States (in spite of the eruption of Iceland’s Eyjafjallajökull volcano!) in April 2010, and were invited to Washington, D.C., for meetings with other MCCA grant recipients and the staff of the American Association of Museums and the U.S. State Department.

Upon completion of their oral histories and the transcription process, both teams hosted a “Coffee and Conversation Program.” These programs offered an opportunity for project participants, both interviewers and interviewees, to share their experiences and showcase the stories gathered during the interview process. Through their participation in these panel discussions, community residents added their voices to the outreach efforts of the museums and assisted with the planning of the next phase of the project.

The project teams are currently developing a website that showcases the oral history interviews, and a delegation from the MHHE will travel in December 2010 to help complete the project and conduct additional interviews for a documentary film about the project.

Our final step will be to identify the next area for collaboration to encourage sustainability of the partnership.

Goals and Outcomes

This project was designed to meet the two main goals of the MCCA program: (1) to broaden knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures in communities in the US and abroad; (2) to foster replicable models for international collaborations that reach beyond museum walls. The project teams focused on the following outcomes:

Change in attitudes on the part of the neighborhood communities about their respective museums. At the end of the project, we anticipate that more members of the local audience in each country will believe its neighborhood museum is a relevant forum to address its needs and interests. We also anticipate that more members of the university community will believe the museum on its campus is a viable unit that can help the university achieve its mission.

Change in behaviors on the part of the two university museums. At the end of the project we anticipate MHHE and BMCM will have developed a stronger relationship with the potential for measurable behavioral changes in the number, nature, and degree (intensity) of their future interactions. Both museums have learned new ways of engaging with their respective communities. We believe the project could be a replicable model best suited for community-based museums with a university affiliation.

Change in knowledge about the other country's culture. The primary audience for this outcome, resulting in the greatest measurable change in cultural understanding by the end of the project, will be the project team members (peer-to-peer students and faculty) through the online discussion board, travel between countries, and video teleconferences. The secondary audience for this outcome, resulting in a lower level of change (perhaps not possible to measure by the end of the grant), will be the citizens of Kennesaw/Cobb County and the Ben M'sik neighborhood of Casablanca, through the podcasts, web links, posted transcripts of the oral histories on each museum's website, and eventual publication about the project.

Project Highlights

Excitement about the project was palpable among the faculty and staff at both museums when we were notified that we had been awarded the grant. That excitement briefly turned into trepidation as came to grips with the task that lay before us. We were, however, blessed with an outstanding group of faculty and

staff from each institution who provided leadership for the project, as well as an extraordinary group of students who enthusiastically embraced this opportunity to broaden their horizons. Although the project offered many wonderful moments for the participants on both sides of the Atlantic, the following highlights were particularly memorable.

Surveys conducted during the summer of 2009 of participants in the MH-HE's Summer Institute revealed a disturbing lack of knowledge and understanding of Islam. Additional surveys conducted across the KSU campus and at several community events reinforced the prevalence of misperceptions and stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. Although disturbing, this finding also confirmed our belief in the objectives of our project—to foster meaningful, cross-cultural dialog, improve understanding of Islam within the community, and broaden our constituencies. More than 300 surveys asking the following questions were completed during August and September 2009:

What are your perceptions of Islam?

Although answers varied widely, a number of common themes emerged along the following lines:

Islam is the same as any other religion, whether good or bad

Islam contains a diversity of believers, some of whom are more extremist than others

Islam has been misinterpreted and/or misrepresented by some believers (i.e., “terrorists”) and by outsiders

Islam is “strict,” “traditional,” “oppressive,” “intolerant,” and “narrow-minded”

Islam is “violent,” “angry,” “dominating,” “radical,” “uncaring,” “hateful,” “hostile,” “terrorists,” who “treat women poorly”

Islam is unknown, different, strange, unfamiliar, and weird

Islam has historic roots similar to Christianity and Judaism

Islam is a very popular and widespread religion based in the middle east, but spreading rapidly

Islam is “beautiful,” “peaceful,” “respected” with committed believers

Don't know and don't care or don't know and would like to learn more

A handful of responses showed that respondents did not understand the difference between the terms “Islam” and “Muslim,” and one respondent thought that Islam was a country.

Do you have any Muslim friends?

Yes: 136

No: 163

Have you ever been to a mosque?

Yes: 35

No: 271

Have you ever read the Koran?

Yes: 29

A bit: 76

None: 198

Did 9/11 change your perceptions about Muslims? If so, how?

Yes: 135

No: 150

Trends in the narrative responses included:

The event increased awareness of Muslims, but did not change opinions negatively or positively

Yes, Muslims were seen as “dangerous,” “terrorists,” wanted to “destroy Americans,” source of “fear” for safety

The event increased awareness of Islamic extremism, but did not change perceptions of Muslims in general. All religions have “radicals” and “crazy people.”

The event occurred while the respondent was too young to make an independent opinion, but was likely influenced by negative messages in the media

What challenges would you think Muslim-Americans encounter in the South?

The vast majority of respondents agreed that Muslim-Americans likely experience “prejudice,” “discrimination,” “stereotypes,” “ignorance,” “disrespect,” “fear,” “profiling,” and “racism.” A minority of respondents answered that Muslims most likely have experiences similar to other “minorities,” “non-Christians” or other “immigrants.” Other respondents disagreed with the claim that challenges in the South are any easier or harder than they would be elsewhere in the country.

Two KSU students were awarded Student Assistance for Leadership in Teaching (SALT) grants. A prestigious award, the SALT grants supplemented the MCCA grant by paying for 100 hours of the students’ time on the project. The SALT students participated in recording the oral history interviews and transcribed the interviews. They traveled with members of the KSU faculty and the Moroccan delegation to Washington, D.C. (the first time in the U.S. capital city for both students), and emerged from the project with a significantly wider view of the world

Most of the KSU students engaged in the project had never been to a mosque or had a chance to ask questions about Islam. The president of the on-campus Muslim Student Alliance attended several planning meetings and engaged with the students on the project team. A field excursion to the Al-Farooq Mosque in Midtown Atlanta proved illuminating for students. At the conclusion of the tour, the members of the project team were afforded a chance to ask questions about the mosque, Islam, and the Muslim community in Atlanta. Additionally, the MHHE project team read widely about the history of Islam. The MCCA grant funded resources for both teams to examine the field of oral history and drew upon some of the most important scholarship in the field. The BMCM team engaged in similar activities to prepare their team. They had numerous meetings to plan for the project, and on October 23, 2009, they made a trip to El Jadida, a town that is 100 km away from Casablanca, to visit the horse fair that celebrates the importance of the horse in the culture of the tribes of Chaouia and Tadla. This was an important moment as many of the residents in Ben M’sik are from these backgrounds.

During the winter quarter, the MHHE team traveled to Morocco to visit the BMCM. The experience proved to be profound for each of the travelers, as is evidenced by the following excerpts from their journals:

Stefanie Green: “To say that the trip to Morocco was wonderful would be an understatement. I could not have asked for more warmth, hospitality, openness and genuine graciousness. The country itself was beautiful, and the architecture was so detailed it sometimes bordered on overwhelming (in a good way). It is fortunate that we were able to visit a few cities and see different parts of the country. Casablanca reminded me somewhat of New York in its looks and energy, while Marrakech had the feel of Vegas. For looks, my favorite place was Rabat; it had a serenity and quiet feel that I really enjoyed. The trip to Marrakech was fun and the marketplace was fascinating. The food was great, the architecture was beautiful, and it was just exciting to be there, but the best part was the people. The students we met became instant friends. We spent many hours talking, eating, walking and laughing with them. The other students on campus were equally open, engaging and welcoming. As much as I was terrified to give my presentation to one of their classes, I was sorry that it ended so quickly. The students were inquisitive and the questions they asked were thoughtful and insightful.

On the first day in Morocco I didn’t know what to expect. We were Americans in a Muslim country and it would have been naïve to think that we would be automatically accepted and welcomed, but we were. One of my favorite memories was during the bus trip back from Marrakech to Casablanca. In addition to working on his Master’s, one of the Youssefs (there were two) taught English to other students. One of the tools he used to help them with pronunciation and comprehension was music. He asked me to interpret the lyrics to one of the songs he used for this purpose then he and I started singing “Another Day in Paradise” by Phil Collins. It makes me smile just to think about it.

I don’t think I will ever be able to express how grateful I have been for this experience. While I consider myself an open and accepting person, this trip has allowed me to explore some of my perceptions of Islam face to face. Another bonus of this trip was getting to know the other KSU students better. While I’ve had classes with Emily, Meagan and Jay, and considered them friends, I didn’t know them like I do now. The providence of sharing this trip with them has created a bond that will stay with me forever. Travel is one of the best ways to open our hearts and minds. Regardless of the labels we give ourselves or others, we are all so much more alike than we are different. I know April is not that far away, but it seems like forever until we will be able to see our friends again. There is nothing I look forward to more than the opportunity to show them the

same hospitality and openness they showed us. Thank you Dr. Lewis, thank you State Department, thank you Morocco. I just can't say it enough."

Emily Arp: "Whenever I get the opportunity to travel, I always try to keep an open mind and an adventuresome spirit. This allows me to avoid the tendency to conjure up exceedingly high expectations or become overwhelmed by immense culture shock. All this said, it is truly impossible to walk into a situation completely blank faced, neutral, or with no preconceived notions. I will admit my impressions of Morocco were that of what I read in history books about Fez, or novels about Arabia. For some reason the book, *The Walking Drum* always came to mind; and with that, camels, spices and caravans. As the trip approached and the December weather here in Georgia got colder and colder, it became even harder to refrain from daydreaming about what mystery and adventure awaited me in Casablanca. Thinking back, this trip exceeded any notion I could have possibly had about the people and culture in Morocco. It is one thing to come back with great photographs and postcards, but I returned with lasting friendships and an understanding of a culture very different than my own. The sites and smells were amazing but what will linger most in my mind are the individuals who deeply touched my life. More than anything, this experience has planted a seed inside my heart to encourage others not only to travel, but also to engage in open conversation about the relationship America has with Islamic nations and the desire to strengthen a lasting friendship. Perhaps if both parties attempted to see the many similarities, a more open attitude can be used to address the differences."

Meagan Diedolf: "The trip our group took to Morocco was one of the most fantastic experiences of my life. I learned a lot about other cultures as well as about myself. Our arrival in Morocco was wonderful, and the next day was one of the best. We attended the opening of the new community museum at the University. Kennesaw State helped to build the dual-language exhibit, and I thought it was a huge success. This was also our first opportunity to meet the students from the Moroccan team, as well as other students from the area. Everyone was extraordinarily welcoming, and I have never had so many pictures taken of me. Later, we went to lunch with the team, visited the Hassan II mosque (which was glorious), and that evening, we went out for coffee and a quick tour of Casablanca with Mohammed and Youssef. I particularly enjoyed seeing Marrakech. It was a beautiful city and we had lots of interesting experiences with the snake charmers, the henna artists, and the bazaar. I was so impressed with

our two guide's knowledge of their city and country. They were so proud of their heritage, and I never realized how rich and wonderful it was. When we returned from Marrakech, each one of us presented our lectures. I went first and talked about the Bible Belt. The students were very interested, and we went over time with all of their questions. I have never had the opportunity to do a full lecture before. It was a challenge, but I had a great time interacting with the students and answering their questions. In the afternoons, we went to visit other parts of Casablanca with the team. It was such a joy to get to know them. We all made fast friendships that will last forever. The last day was the most difficult. I hated to leave Morocco; I found it to be the most wonderful place I have ever visited, and I will be forever grateful for the experience."

Professor Samir El Azhar, the co-coordinator of the Ben M'sik Community Museum, offered these observations: "This visit enabled the American students and the faculty member to meet their Moroccan counterparts and to get acquainted with the Islamic culture. The KSU delegation attended the opening ceremony of the exhibit "Ben M'sik: Creating Community in Casablanca" which is an excellent example of the joint efforts of Kennesaw State University and the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Ben M'sik, Casablanca, to consolidate the cultural and academic relations between Morocco and the United States of America. We were honored by the presence of an American delegation representing the diplomatic and cultural institutions in Morocco. Ms. Mary Jeffers, Country Public Affairs Officer, represented the US Embassy. Ms. Elizabeth Gracon, Public Affairs Officer, Abdelkrim Raddadi, Cultural Affairs Specialist and Boubker Mazoz, Public Affairs Specialist, represented the US Consulate General. From the Moroccan side, two governors and several local authorities attended this ceremony. A crowd of more than two hundred students from the different departments of the faculty were there to show their support to this kind of cultural activities. It was an opportunity for the KSU delegation to meet the Ben M'sik students and to have an idea about the Moroccan culture from the different artifacts which were displayed on this occasion.

The KSU team visited Rabat, the capital of Morocco which is an hour trip from Casablanca. The American delegation visited several monuments belonging to different historical eras and had lunch in a typically Moroccan restaurant. The Andalusian architecture, mosaics and decoration gave our American friends an idea about the diversity of the Moroccan culture.

The KSU delegation also made a trip to Marrakech which is three hours away from Casablanca. Marrakech, known as the “Red City,” is an important and former imperial city in Morocco. Like Moroccan cities, the city of Marrakech comprises both an old fortified city (the [HYPERLINK “http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medina_quarter”](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medina_quarter) \o “Medina quarter”*médina*) and an adjacent modern city (called Gueliz). Marrakech has the largest traditional market (souk) in Morocco and also has one of the busiest squares in Africa and the world, [HYPERLINK “http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Djemaa_el_Fna”](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Djemaa_el_Fna) \o “Djemaa el Fna”*Djemaa el Fna*. The square bustles with acrobats, story-tellers, water sellers, dancers, and musicians. In addition, the KSU delegation gave several presentations to the students of the English and American Studies Department. It was an opportune occasion for the Ben M’sik students to get acquainted with some aspects of the American culture.

Members of the KSU team gave the following presentations at the university in Ben M’sik: Dr. Sandra Bird: American Art Associated with 9-11, Emily Arp: Hip Hop Culture in Atlanta , Jay Lutz: Baseball as America: Understanding the American Pastime, Stefanie Green: Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States, and Meagan Diedolf: Life in the Bible Belt: Religion in the American South.

As a coordinator of this project, I can safely and sincerely assert that this visit of the KSU team to Morocco was a complete success at many levels. At the human level, the American and the Moroccan students have succeeded in setting up strong friendship ties. They were able to merge into one team. Together, they visited places, shared experiences and had fun. At the cultural level, both teams exchanged their cultural heritage. Each one has become aware of the other’s culture, which has increased their mutual respect and their understanding of each other. At the professional level, both teams worked together in a very cordial and amiable atmosphere.

I honestly believe that such an exchange program is an important step in bringing people of different cultures, continents, religions and historical backgrounds together to promote peace and trust and eradicate prejudice and bigotry. I would like to conclude by stating that no one can deny the importance of books in widening one’s scope, but I believe that such exchange programs are more important than books because they allow students to undergo first hand experiences. When they shake someone’s hands, they feel its warmth. When they talk to someone, they see his smiling face. When they share something with

somebody, they have peace at the heart. I was overwhelmed when I heard an American student telling her Moroccan friend that she was spending one of the best moments in her life.”

Blogging, Tweeting, and Befriending—Using Social Media to Build Bridges

One of the requirements of the grant emphasized by the U.S. State Department was the use of social media (blogs, Twitter, and Facebook) to facilitate collaboration. Although social media proved to be a useful tool for engaging the groups, we were surprised at the reluctance of our students, whom we consider to be “digital natives,” to post their thoughts online. At the AAM/State Department meeting in Washington, D.C., we discovered that other project teams had encountered the same problem. We could only surmise that our students, who can barely go an hour without texting or tweeting one another, considered these project-mandated social media outlets to be a more formal communication forum. Language skills likely also contributed to their reluctance to blog, tweet, or chat over Facebook. Whatever the reasons, most of the students did not feel comfortable posting their thoughts online. Face-to-face communication, whether in person or via video teleconference, proved to be the most effective way to communicate and develop relationships. Social media, however, did provide for recording of some memorable thoughts during the project. Following are several representative posts from the blog ([HYPERLINK “http://mhhe-bmcm.blogspot.com/2009/10/who-has-posted-on-blog.html”](http://mhhe-bmcm.blogspot.com/2009/10/who-has-posted-on-blog.html) <http://mhhe-bmcm.blogspot.com/2009/10/who-has-posted-on-blog.html>):

Dr. Anne Sinkey, October 13, 2009 (MHHE):

At the screening of the film *Inside Islam* at Georgia State University last night, I noticed that two of the speakers--including the film’s producer--made references to Martin Luther King, Jr. The speakers seemed to be making some sort of comparison between the struggle for civil rights by African-Americans and the situation of Muslim-Americans. On the one hand, I think this is a great strategy for those who live in Atlanta, since most of us are familiar with and proud of the civil rights heritage in our area. This makes the struggle for Muslim justice seem more familiar. However, I have some concerns about making comparisons between the situation of Muslim-Americans in this decade and the situation of African-Americans in the ‘50s and ‘60s. I worry that labelling both as

the same kind of “racism” ignores some very important differences in religious identity, historical context, the media and public opinion. I’m curious what you all think about this kind of comparison. Is it useful? Or does it do more harm than good? What are the dangers, if there are any?

Mohamed Saidi, October 6, 2009 (BSCM):

My name is Mohamed Saidi and I am 26 years old. I am about to finish a two-year MA program in Moroccan-American Studies at Hassan II University, Ben M’sik, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Casablanca. I am currently putting finishing touches to my MA thesis, which is on the teaching of information and computer literacy skills in Moroccan middle schools. The MA program has opened up an excellent opportunity to broaden my understanding of the American culture. Learning about the latter has started in my undergraduate studies and has been gained through books as well as real-life experiences. Of the latter, I would like to refer to two major incidents. The first experience lasted for five days, 2-6 May, 2007. I acted then as translator of English and Arabic between Moroccans and Americans at the Medical Clinic in Dar Bouazza, Casablanca. That face-to-face contact with American doctors helped me to learn about Americans and some of their values. The second enlightening experience dates back to last July, when our English department received some visitors from Kennesaw State University, including nine students and two professors. The professors, Dr. Karen Robinson and Dr. Hannah Harvey, expertly coached a three-day workshop on how to narrate and perform everyday stories. Sharing our stories with our American partners was very enriching in the sense that each participant gained a better understanding of the other culture and hence respects and appreciates its values and traditions. Besides, we spent happy, memorable moments with our American visitors during their stay in our campus and we enjoyed our visits to some sites in Casablanca after the workshop classes. The visit ended by building a tie of friendship with our visitors and a promise to further generate intercultural dialogue. My growing interest in performance ethnography leads me to volunteer for Casablanca–Kennesaw Project. Besides the skills I have learned in the above-mentioned workshop, my familiarity with field work research will enable me to work towards preserving my people’s oral history and therefore serving my community. Last but not least, I am looking forward to participating in this project and achieving our goals.

It All Depends on the Volcano

As planning proceeded throughout late 2009 and into 2010 for the visit of the BMCM team to the U.S., both teams continued conducting interviews in their respective communities. The focus on diversity was a key theme—interviewees were selected from a range of backgrounds to provide the teams with the broadest perspective possible. In the midst of the interviews, each team continued to attend special events. Members of the MHHE team attended Morocco Day at Georgia State University on February 24, 2010, and met the Moroccan Ambassador to the United States.

In April 2010, five members of the BMCM team traveled to the United States. The Moroccans attended classes at KSU, gave guest lectures, and participated in the “Coffee and Conversation” event, which was hosted by the MHHE on April 15, 2010. At the event, we asked the audience of over 150 community members to fill out the same survey that we completed at the beginning of the MCCA project. We then opened the program by introducing our Moroccan guests: Khadija Sabbar, Wafaa Afkir, Youssef Fdilal, Dr. Abdelouahab Dbich, and Professor Samir El Azhar. Ali Abedi (President, KSU Muslim Student Association) provided a brief overview of the history of Islam and its core beliefs. Dr. Anne Richards (Associate Professor of English, Kennesaw State University) introduced each panelist and served as the moderator. Our goal was to invite each panelist to focus broadly on the following topics, weaving in personal stories and the importance of cross-cultural understanding. One overarching question that guided the program was: What does it mean to be Muslim in America and specifically in the American South? Rumeysa Goker and Mirkena Ozer (both interviewees) examined the status of women and the family in Islam and shared their personal experiences living in the United States. Ayhan Kurucu (interviewee) focused on American perceptions of Islam, Professor Samir El Azhar (Ben M’Sik Community Museum Co-coordinator) talked about Islam: a religion of tolerance, Khadija Sabbar (MCCA project team) discussed her work on behalf of women in Morocco. Stefanie Green (MCCA project team) ended the program by discussing her personal experiences gathering the oral history interviews and travelling to Morocco. The program ended with a spirited question and answer session and a reception, sponsored by the MCCA, the KSU Muslim Student Association, and the Istanbul Center in Atlanta.

While the Moroccan delegation was in Atlanta, the project received a commendation from Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue. Members of both project

teams traveled to the Georgia State Capitol in downtown Atlanta to meet the governor and receive the commendation, an event for which we have photographic evidence. The BMCM team also participated in an architectural walking tour of Atlanta followed by an evening of baseball at Turner Field where we watched the Atlanta Braves play the Colorado Rockies.

The eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland on April 14 added an interesting dimension to the Moroccans visit. The AAM and the U.S. State Department had organized a meeting in Washington, D.C. for all of the U.S.-based grant recipients. The meeting was scheduled during the time when the Moroccan team was in the United States because it coincided with the planned visit of another grant recipient's overseas partner. While the Moroccans made it to the U.S. just ahead of the eruption, the Italian team did not. They remained stranded in Italy as volcanic ash caused the cancellation of flights in and out of Europe. Consequently our Moroccan partners were the only representations from abroad who were able to participate in the Washington meeting. As the departure date for partners drew near and Eyjafjallajökull continued to spew a plume of volcanic ash across Europe, our project team became anxious about whether the Moroccans would be able leave as scheduled. "It all depends on the volcano" became our mantra.

As we monitored the volcanic activity in Iceland, we continued immersing our Moroccan colleagues in American culture. We took them to the U.S. Capitol building and the Library of Congress, as well as to multiple branches of the Smithsonian Museum and the array of national monuments that grace the National Mall. We paused for photographs in front of the White House, and bought t-shirts and trinkets from sidewalk vendors. We rode public transportation everywhere, and even visited a suburban shopping mall, perhaps the quintessential American experience. By the end of their visit, the Moroccans had seen and done more truly "American" things than many Americans do in their lifetime.

Waafa Afkir kept a journal of her experience that began while she was still in Morocco and reflected her perceptions of the United States:

February 2010 (BMCM):

I came to the faculty in order to meet my friends and congratulate them for passing the Mid-term tests; I met one of my friends who started congratulating me for something that I had no idea about. Later on, I was informed that I was chosen to go to the United States. First thing I did was to call my family to tell

them about the good news. Nobody believed me! Once my family and friends heard the news, I started hearing comments like: “Do not let the American girls intimidate you”, “Take as many pictures as you can”, “The American Dream”, “Stay as you are!!”, “Say hello to President Obama”

“You’re lucky!!”....

April 13, 2010, a.m.:

The team’s members, my family, everybody is in the waiting room of the airport; the sign of happiness is in everybody’s face. After days of preparations for this trip, we are almost done. I cannot accurately describe my feelings: it’s a mixture of excitement, happiness, satisfaction but the most prominent feeling is fear, the fear from the unknown. I kept asking my self one question: what shall we do if they did not receive us well, if they get bored with us after the first days, after all it is a totally different culture, different style of life, different way of thinking. Yes, we do know a lot about the Americans from the different courses we have had about the American history, the American literature and the American culture and from the media but it may not be the real reality of the American society!!!

April 4, 2010, p.m.:

It is 08:10 p.m. after 10 hours of flight, everybody is exhausted, and we need to get some rest. We were very pleased to see familiar faces, Stefanie and Jay were there waiting for us, how wonderful to see these smiling faces!!! It was the first time that we saw our partners Dr. Catherine Lewis and Dr. Jennifer Dickey. They seem kind!!! Stefanie took us to the hotel, next day we had a cheerful meeting with the MHHE team. First contact, face to face, with them. The first seconds I hesitated. I was a little bit frightened but after seeing the old friends Emily, Dr. Robinson, Dr. Bird ; and introducing the other members of the team, I felt more comfortable, more relaxed. After all, Americans are not cold as it is reported about them.

What surprised me most is to find out that I had a wrong idea about Americans. I thought that they are reserved. They ignored totally other people, especially from the third world as our country ‘Morocco’, but reality was different. Wherever we met people, they were kind, polite, welcoming, friendly, warm, “smiling”. It’s Surprising!! Before I went to the US, I was very concerned about

the perception of Americans of the veil especially that I wear the veil but again nobody has noticed that or has ever made any mean remarks about this. They accepted me as I am and not as they wanted to see me. All their questions about this subject were triggered from their curiosity about Islam and the Muslim world.

April 15, 2010:

While we were there, we attended an event organized by the MHHA “The Coffee and Conversation event ” under the theme of “Being Muslim in the South of Georgia” A total success, big audience: diversity in terms of age. Religion: Muslims, Christians. Origins: Turkish; Pakistani; Arabs, Americans. I saw that Americans recognize the existence of a minority that was marginalized and neglected for a long time in this diverse society!

Conclusion: Americans have a false image about Islam; but nothing is impossible!

April 16, 2010:

On Friday, we paid a visit to Emily’s house, she was so sweet. With the help of Stefanie, they prepared a table full of different kinds of cakes and candies. I really appreciated that, but what will stick in my mind forever is my conversation with Emily’s mom: a lovely person. She hugged me and said “Emily loves you”. I wanted to say “I love her too” but I didn’t!! First time to feel that feelings don’t recognize borders or differences! Kind people, promise to come!! Erin, Allison, Ali, each one of them is so different from the other, but I think if I lived in the U.S, they would be my best friends! I have something in common with each one of them even if we are from different worlds and different cultures! Yes, we are different yet we can love each other, we can live with each other. After all, we are all Allah’s children. Before this trip, I considered everything to be either black or white. If we don’t think alike, we don’t worship the same God, we don’t share the same values or principles, we will not be able to understand each other! That was silly!! At the end, I would like to thank anybody who participated in the success of this project my dear coach Professor Samir El Azhar, Dr. Catherine Lewis, Dr. Jennifer Dickey, MHHE and BMCM teams. Special thanks to the MCCA organization for making the dream to visit the United States come true.

Tearing Down Walls

Meanwhile, in Morocco, the plan for the Ben M'sik Community Museum changed. An extension to a more spacious building that can accommodate the museum the Center of Arts was begun. The new facility will open in 2011. This was the nature of the whole project; new opportunities arose and the teams embraced them. Because we had a longstanding relationship, it was easy to modify and adjust our schedule as necessary. This would have been much more difficult had the MHHE and BMCM teams not had such a friendship.

To help disseminate the important lessons of the project in Morocco, the faculty and staff engaged in this collaboration have published several articles, including Professor El Azhar's "Moroccan Perceptions of the US." Several Moroccan Arabophone newspapers published articles about the BMCM and about the Moroccan-American cultural cooperation. Most notably, the BMCM has received official accreditation from the Moroccan Ministry of Education.

On June 5, 2010, the BMCM team held their "Coffee and Conversation" event which they retitled "Conversation While Spinning Wool." "The event was an expression by the university of its wish to integrate into its social-economic environment," noted Professor El Azhar. "The event represented the demolition of the apparent wall that separated the university from the neighborhood, even if the physical wall that surrounds the university remains. The wall has historically blocked the view of neighborhood residents of the cultural and academic activities taking place inside the campus. Likewise, it prevents the members of university community from knowing what is going on in the neighborhood. The oral history project began the process of breaking down the metaphorical wall between the two communities and has empowered the BMCM to function as an engine for the neighborhood by raising awareness among its inhabitants of their role as actors and participants in the development of their country as a whole."

The "Conversation While Spinning Wool" program included a Japanese song performed by the choir of the Faculty of Letters, Ben M'sik in a demonstration of Morocco's openness to other cultures and its willingness to explore other civilizations. The main event was the panel discussion "Social Life in Ben M'sik" during which five Ben M'sik presented their tespoke about their lives and their neighborhood:

Al Haj Lamlih, a 75-year old man told the audience about the history of the land upon which this teeming neighborhood had been built. A mere fifty

years earlier Ben M'sik was a land owned by a family whose name was Ben M'sik. Farmers grew wheat and vegetables on the Ben M'sik land. Al Haj-Lamlih witnessed the economic, social, and architectural changes of the community as it transitioned from an agricultural area to one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in Casablanca.

Sara Al Shaoufi, a 14-year-old school girl told the audience about her experience as a pupil in Ben M'sik. She is a brilliant student who had the highest mark in the whole city of Casablanca. She stated that people believe that Ben M'sik is a dangerous neighborhood inhabited only by outlaws and social outcasts. She reminded the audience that Ben M'sik had given birth to clever and intelligent people—doctors, artists, teachers and other successful people. “Ben M'sik is a nice place,” she added.

Amine Ait Al Housine, a fifteen-year-old school boy, preferred to focus on a darker side of Ben M'sik. Drug-addiction and crime were rampant throughout the neighborhood. After witnessing a violent fight, Amine was so terrified that he asked his parents to move to another “safe” neighborhood.

Khadija Ghazali, a 40-year-old NGO activist, narrated the ups and downs of her life in the neighborhood. Because she was the oldest child in her family, she had to leave the university to work in a clothes factory to sustain her poor family. Twenty years later, she returned to the university in the heart of the neighborhood in which she was born and raised and succeeded in getting a B.A in Social Development. She adhered to the social programs launched by the National Initiative for Human development (NIHD). This ambitious project assists the Government in improving inclusiveness and implementing processes at the local level in order to enhance the use of social and economic infrastructure and services by poor and vulnerable groups. The National Initiative for Human Development concentrates primarily on the marginalized neighborhoods and aims to improve the social conditions of the people living in these underserved areas. Ms. Ghazali is an example of a social activist who believes in a noble cause to serve all the members of the Ben M'sik community.

Dr. Kacem Marghatta is a 45-year-old professor in the Department of Arabic Literature at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Ben M'sik. In beautiful, poetic, classical Arabic, Dr. Marghatta shared some of his childhood reminiscences with the audience. He recalled that he used to play football in the same spot where the Ben M'sik Cultural Center stands today. There used to be a well from which he and his friends used to drink cool water once the football match

was over. He added that it is marvelous that in the place of that well a cultural institution (referring to the place where our ceremony was taking place) stands today to quench the thirst of the residents of the Ben M'sik for cultural activities. He also remembered the open fields where spikes of wheat grew. He pointed out that it is really wonderful to see that in the place of those green fields two academic institutions stand side by side, the Faculty of Letters and Humanities and the Ben M'sik Faculty of Sciences. In the past, the place provided the population of the area with bread, food for the stomach. Today, the place provides the people of Ben M'sik with knowledge and wisdom, food for the mind. Dr. Marghatta concluded his remarks with a reading of one of his poems, which he dedicated to all women and mothers of Ben M'sik in honor of their perseverance and devotion.

A short musical program followed the "conversations" of the panel members. A famous singer of traditional songs ("malhoun") and two students from the Faculty of Letters, Ben M'sik, blended traditional Moroccan music with the western music, delivering a song in three different languages—Arabic, Spanish, and English. The musical performance was followed by the awarding of certificates to the students of the Faculty of Letters, Ben M'sik, who participated in an Intercultural Performance Ethnography workshop conducted by KSU professors Dr. Karen Robinson and Dr. Hannah Harvey during the International Festival of University Theatre held in July 2009 in Casablanca. The workshop culminated in collaborative tableaux performances presented by participants. Students who participated in the "Casablanca-Kennesaw Community Project" which took place between September 2009 and June 2010 and culminated in the "Conversation While Spinning Wool" were also recognized.

As Professor El Azhar concluded: "The "Conversation While Spinning Wool" event was a great success. It was instructive and entertaining to students as well as the residents of the Ben M'sik neighborhood. The BMCM succeeded in reaching out to the Ben M'sik community through artistic and cultural activities, much as the MHHE succeeded in reaching out to the Muslim community in the Atlanta metropolitan area. As the project nears completion, both museums have established relationships with new constituencies whose members now perceive the museums as cultural resources for their communities. Perhaps more importantly, many cultural prejudices and stereotypes have been dispelled. Participants in the project from the communities and the museums have a new appreciation and understanding for each other, and the MHHE and BMCM project teams have developed friendships that appear destined to be long-lived."

This has been an engaging and illuminating project that was made possible by the MCCA grant. We hope that our partnership will serve as a model for future initiatives. Our next step is to create a documentary about the collaboration, one that could be shared with future grantees. The strength of our project was the result of committed participants, good planning, willing interviewees and interviewers, broad support from our respective universities, community members who engaged in the process, and, above all, the strength of friendship. We will end with a quote from Emily Dickenson: “My friends are my estate.” There is nothing more valuable than that.

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