

My Unexpected Journey: Forming Friendships across Cultural Boundaries

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My upbringing did not prepare me to be a world traveler. I was born in 1986, the oldest of four children and the only girl; I have only ever lived in one county. My parents were of the opinion that it was not their job to send us to places—we went on vacations to neighboring states, always packing up the car and driving to the not-so-exotic destinations like Chattanooga, Tennessee or Birmingham, Alabama. Our farthest destination as a family was Boston, Massachusetts—but we always went together and it was never too far from home. We lived in a suburb north of Atlanta, just barely considered part of the metro-area; and for the first eighteen years of my life, even going down to the city was either for a special occasion or just to drive through it on our way to Florida. I stayed in my suburban bubble and had little contact with many minorities.

At my high school, there were fewer than twenty minority students, and the majority of those students were Latino. When I graduated high school in 2004, I chose to attend Kennesaw State University, an undecided major leaning slightly

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towards teaching history. At Kennesaw, I do not remember feeling culture shock when I came upon a wider variety of people. We all had something we could bond over, the horrible parking situation, and I never felt like anyone was ostracized because of race or religion. People are people, and if they have something in common, they find that they are not so different.

My first taste of international travel was in the summer of 2005 when I was invited to the wedding of a friend. She was marrying a Scotsman in a small town north of Edinburgh, Scotland. I was thrilled to be included in the invitation and saved my money to be able to attend. After anxiously awaiting the arrival of my first passport, I took off to the UK to attend the wedding, to see Edinburgh, and travel to London with only one other friend (a trusting gesture by my parents since I was just one year out of high school and no one in my family had been abroad). My second time out of the United States was on a cruise. My family and I visited the Mayan ruins, Chichen Itza, on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. This particular trip thrilled the historian in me; the pyramid and ruins were amazing and learning about the history and culture of the people who lived there was exactly the kind of thing that interested me. Following those two trips, I was eager to travel more, new places have always thrilled me, but I had to wait until I had the opportunity.

In the fall of 2009, I stumbled upon the Public History program at Kennesaw State University and felt that I had finally found my niche in the field of history. I finished the certificate program offered and became the student assistant for the Department of Museums, Archives & Rare Books at Kennesaw State University. When Dr. Jennifer Dickey and Dr. Catherine Lewis asked me to be a part of the Museums & Communities Collaboration Abroad (MCCA) grant project, I initially said yes to stay in contact with other public history students and to stay busy with a project that was related to the field—having finished the required classes for the certificate, I missed the work that I was able to participate in with other students. The more I learned about the grant, the more I realized what an exceptional opportunity this was. Before joining this project, I knew very little about Moroccan culture or Islam. Our first few weeks were spent researching Islam, reading reports done by the PEW Research Center, and discussing any lingering questions we might have about the religion. As the anniversary of 9/11 approached, we began to plan how the commemorations might fit into the project.

September 11, 2001 had a lasting impact on how Muslims are perceived in America, and especially in the American South. The event changed a great many Americans' view of the Islamic world. Because of the decision of a few men, every American became aware of the Muslims in their community and the whole of the religion was looked at through one lens. Before 9/11, I had very little contact with any Muslims. There was a Muslim girl in my Latin class, but to me, she was just Rabia. After 9/11, my views changed slightly, not to the extent of stereotyping all Muslims as terrorists, but I became more aware of the religion and people. I started noticing when Muslim women had their heads covered but, instead of brushing it off as I had before, I wondered about Islam and this different religion that was right in front of me. Since 2011 was the ten year anniversary of the event, it was an ideal opportunity to really look at the how the nation viewed Muslims in post 9/11 America. The first assignment of the project was to attend a 9/11 commemoration event. I decided to attend an event at a first responder's headquarters in Alpharetta, about forty-five minutes from Kennesaw. The ceremony itself focused on paying homage to the fallen firefighters, policemen, and emergency personnel who lost their lives in New York City and Washington, D.C. I was impressed with the organizers, the terrorists were remarked upon, but mentions of Islam as a culture of terrorism that I expected to hear were absent. It was really more of a memorial service than anything else. I thought that it was a classy way to remember those brave men and women without dragging in inflammatory and accusatory speeches that were present on television and at other events that day.

Our team also conducted focus groups throughout the fall semester and I was lucky enough to be a part of a few of them. Three were conducted with university students, one was to be a majority Muslim focus group, and the last one with an Islamic youth group. The university students we spoke to were usually engaged, but it seemed like there were only a few students comfortable talking about Islam in class and the rest took a backseat, which was understandable. When people have questions about Islam, it can often be hard to voice them. The informal focus group that we conducted at the Islamic Center with teenagers was the most interesting to me. It's one thing to ask adults how being a Muslim shapes and impacts their everyday life in the American South, but it is another to hear the answer from a teenager who has grown up in America. There was a ten year old, a brilliant little slip of a girl, who asked us questions about the project that no adult had raised. Those children really had a grasp of the general

attitudes towards Muslims posed by the media and how to balance their religion with being a normal teenager.

When the travel team was announced in October 2011, I was incredibly excited and honored to be included among the students selected. As the semester progressed, I started to understand that not only was this to be a working trip to plan the online exhibit, but it was also to be a cultural exchange; we were to be ambassadors not just for our university, but for the grant project. Two days before our travel team took flight, I graduated with my bachelor's degree in American History with my Public History Certificate. It was a proud moment for me because I had been in college for longer than originally planned. It also kept me focused on graduation more than our trip, so it did not hit me that we were leaving for Morocco until the weekend before. As we all met at the airport early Thursday morning to check our luggage and make our way through security, it suddenly became very real to me that we were traveling to Morocco.

We landed in Casablanca early on the next day and watched the sun rise over the green landscape as we were shuttled into the city to the hotel. After meeting Professor Samir El Azhar, we set off to tour the Hassan II Mosque. The massive complex housed a library, a museum, and the mosque itself, which was enormous on its own; but when you add the other two buildings and a plaza that spans more than one city block, the entire area was vast. We were very fortunate to be able to tour the inside of the mosque and see the vast hall where the people came to pray. The tour guide told us that this was the second largest mosque in the world and has the highest minaret. The mosque was constructed on the water and took six years to complete by craftsmen chosen from throughout Morocco, so that each region was represented. We were extremely fortunate later on that day to be able to watch the people come pouring out of the mosque after the Friday afternoon prayer. It was interesting because all of the people were so different; some wore traditional robes, and others wore business suits or soccer jerseys. I had been told that Islam was like every other religion—a personal faith where every individual practiced in their own way—but it did not really click in my mind until that moment when I saw the multitude of people walking out of the mosque.

The moment I was most anticipating happened on our first day, as well. When we arrived back at the hotel, the Ben M'sik Community Museum (BMCM) students were waiting for us. I was so excited to meet them. Khadija and Soumia, whom I had only previously met on Skype, immediately wrapped their

arms around me in a welcoming hug. We all sat down and chatted for a few minutes before going with them to Sqala, an old fort on the seaside. As we chatted on the roof of the fort, we were able to ask each other questions about each other's lives. I looked around at one point and watched everyone; the boys were off to one corner joking while the girls talked in smaller groups, but every single one of us had a huge smile on.

Our weekend was spent in Marrakesh with two of the Moroccan students, Houda Karamallah and Zineb Loutfi. I am very glad that students were able to come with us; it allowed all of us to bond and develop lasting friendships. The weekend was spent going to many museums, often having to wind our way down narrow streets to find the entrances to these museums. It is so interesting how museums are curated differently in Morocco. A lot of times, there would be a case with some artifacts, a label written in French and Arabic with what the object was, and, if you were lucky, a date. There was very little interpretation. Professor El Azhar told us that museums were not well thought of in the country and that most people thought they were a waste of time. During our visit, the King of Morocco appointed Mehdi Qotbi to be the president of the National Museum Foundation, which I hope will help the country see that museums can add to their already rich culture⁽¹⁾.

We had two opportunities in Marrakesh that I will remember for the rest of my life. The first was visiting the souk, the marketplace. This place is what I imagined when I thought of a Moroccan marketplace. In my mind, I saw the tight passageway with stalls lining the side, but it was also so much more. I felt like I had sensory overload. Everywhere I looked, stalls were selling leather goods, tea sets, carpets, robes, hats, shoes, jewelry, scarves, and so many other brightly colored goods. The spices in the air were so strong. The men at the stalls called out to each other and to potential customers. Motorcycles rode through the narrow corridor as we jumped out of the way. It was such a unique experience and I do not think we have anything that can even compare in America. Our second amazing event was an invitation to have lunch at the house of Houda's cousin. Their hospitality was so wonderful, and the food was absolutely delicious! There were so many courses, first a salad, then the most fantastic chicken

1. "HM The King Appoints Mehdi Qotbi President of National Museum Foundation," last modified 19 December 2011, <http://www.map.ma/en/activites-royales/hm-king-appoints-mehdi-qotbi-president-national-museum-foundation>.

I have ever eaten, a dessert, and after that, we went upstairs to a sitting room to have mint tea and cookies. We were all so full after, but so grateful to have the opportunity to visit someone's home. The house was beautifully decorated, with vibrant couches lining the wall and beautiful lamps and tables throughout the rooms. After our lunch, we went back to Casablanca where the work began the next day.

The workshops that were conducted by Julia Brock, the coordinator of the MCCA grant project and curator of the Museum of History & Holocaust Education (MHHE), and Richard Harker, the Education and Outreach Coordinator at MHHE, were really helpful. A few of the American students had a background in curating exhibits, but an online exhibit was a new concept to all of us. We split into smaller groups to work on a concept statement for the exhibit and definitions of the themes that form a central component of the exhibit. I really enjoyed our small group time, because I felt like I really was able to connect with my Moroccan teammates. They seemed more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in the smaller groups, rather than when we came back together as a large group. I am really excited to see how this exhibit will turn out. We all managed to work out a concept statement and several definitions that we will use as a base for the text on the website. The best part was that, because we were able to travel to Morocco and work with them, this will really be a collaborative effort.

My favorite part of the week was the tea party that the BMCM students hosted for us. As we entered a classroom, we were given dates and milk, which we were told was a traditional way to welcome guests. We could tell that they had worked very hard to make this a success, and it truly was incredibly touching. This was also a chance for us to all just talk with each other and find out what we had in common. The girls also brought in a henna artist, so all of the American girls and a few of the Moroccan girls had a henna tattoo by the end of the party. I commented that it seemed like something to do at slumber parties when you're younger, along with painting each other's nails. Hanane Aboulahmame, who was watching as I got henna on both of my hands, laughed and told me that's exactly what they did. I think that this event really helped us to bond as an entire team. When it came time to say goodbye to everyone the next day, a few of us were in tears, including me. Matt Scott, Dara Vekasey, and I were discussing later about how we did not really expect to become so attached to these people, but because they were all so genuine, warm, and welcoming, we could not help it. We all felt like we had made good friends, and it was hard to

part, but we all exchanged Facebook information and have kept in contact since we parted ways. As I hugged Zineb, I told her that this was not goodbye but we would see each other again. Zineb and I cried together, and then Mohamed Wardi called me over to have a picture taken with him. As I approached, he saw the tears in my eyes and engulfed me in a huge hug exclaiming, “Don’t cry, Robyn!” I laughed as I dried my tears and told him, “Zineb started it.”

Our last day was spent in Rabat with Professor El Azhar and Dr. Jadour, another member of the history department and BMCM team at Hassan II. I was surprised at how Greek parts of the city looked. I suppose that I should have realized that it made sense that architecture styles would be shared, especially since it was so close to the Strait of Gibraltar; but in my mind, Africa and Europe were separate continents, even though these cities were in the same region. One of my favorite places in Rabat was the ruins at Chellah, which had a medieval wall around Roman ruins. As an American historian, the entire place was so amazing. We do not have anything that old, it really just boggles my mind that there are still places with ruins that are thousands of years old! I also thought that the tomb of King Mohamed V and King Hassan II were really visually impressive. Professor El Azhar and his family were kind enough to invite us to their home for dinner that night, and I think Mrs. El Azhar might be one of the best cooks on the planet. His daughter, Zineb, was so much like her father; both were incredibly friendly and had the same great sense of humor. After dinner, it was time to say goodbye to Samir, which was harder than I thought it would be. Matt asked Zineb if we could kidnap her dad and bring him home with us because he had taken such care of us all week. After shedding a few more tears and climbing on the bus, we headed back to Casablanca to pack and nap before our 4:30 AM wake-up call.

Our early morning trek back to the airport was more somber than our arrival had been. I was thinking of the new friends that I would miss, but I was also excited to come home and share my experiences with my friends and family. It was very difficult to say goodbye, but, unlike my henna tattoo which has already faded, the memories that I have of these wonderful people will remain.