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Morocco: Songs For Peace SDC 2017

The stars above me are twinkling in the clearest night sky I have ever seen. We watch shooting stars and satellites dance across the pitch black canvass of night, pointing out constellations and sharing jokes from the day just concluded. In the rural village of Bennikola, I lie on a concrete roof with my newfound American best friends and Moroccan host siblings and witness a night sky undisturbed from light pollution of modern civilization for the first time in my life. During this moment, I realize how far from home I really am.

Moroccan culture always intrigued me, but I never dreamed I would receive the opportunity to travel there myself. I remember opening my acceptance email from NCWA in my 7th period and being overcome with emotion. I couldn't believe that I was getting the opportunity to be a part of something so extraordinary. Looking back now, I honestly still cannot believe it.

The next few months until departure seemed to pass slower than usual as we handled my final preparations and counted down the days until I would depart for JFK. When the day arrived, I bid farewell to my family and boarded a plane to New York City, anxious to meet the group that would ultimately become my family for the next month. My nerves melted away the more we talked and played the icebreaking games Jason, our group leader, prepared. What I didn't realize while preparing for the program was how big of a leap into the unknown this trip would be. I was taking a giant step out of my comfort zone and into a culture completely alien to me. This all ran through my mind after we had boarded our plane to Casablanca, I remember smiling to myself and knowing that this was going to be one of the best months of my life.

According to my journal, which I kept religiously throughout my trip, we landed in Casablanca around 8:30 AM and met our in-country group leader Malika. (she would become almost like a second mother) Boarding our bus, we set off for Rabat, where we would spend the first leg of our trip. Rabat was where we began to become acclimated to Moroccan culture. The Center for Cross Cultural Learning (or CCCL) in the Rabat medina became our second home. Within its intricately tiled walls we were greeted by people of the most welcoming nature, ready to teach us all we would need to know about Moroccan culture and social norms to prepare us for the month ahead. We received five days of lessons in Darija, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic, from the most kindhearted and patient teacher we could have asked for, Jamila. Other lectures and activities we partook in at the CCCL ranged from Moroccan gender dynamics and Islamic culture, to learning to bargain in Arabic. In the CCCL we also met Rasheed, our second in country leader that would introduce us to Moroccan music, our program's theme. On our third day in Rabat, we met our host families and began our first of two homestays in Morocco. In my Rabat homestay, I lived with my mother, father, grandmother, two year old sister, and seven year old brother. My family was very welcoming and patient with my broken Arabic, I would often keep my notes with me so I could attempt conversation. My mother was the only member of my family that spoke rather fluent English. I spent most of my time in my house playing with my host siblings. Since they were both very young and didn't speak English, I had to get creative in finding ways to communicate. Fortunately, a language barrier didn't stop us from coming up with the most bizarre, but fun, games to play. In fact, my favorite memory with them was when we didn't have a ball, so we played soccer in the house with a baby doll head. Not having a lot of practice with Arabic (because of how early in the trip we were) and being isolated from the group honestly made this homestay quite a challenge for me. However, the more I bonded with

my siblings, the easier it became. I have a fifteen year old sister so living with siblings much younger was alien to me. But by the end of the five days with my family, saying goodbye wasn't easy. I was so thankful of them for opening up their home to me. I knew I would miss them.

After bidding our families farewell, we drove North for our second destination: Chefchaouen. Chefchaouen was utterly breathtaking, nicknamed "The Blue City" nearly every structure dwelling in this town is painted blue. According to the locals, this odd feature has the purpose of warding away mosquitoes in the summertime. Chefchaouen was where we learned most of our music we would perform later in the program. Besides music rehearsal, Chefchaouen was where we had most of our down time. Perfect days were spent exploring the cities winding, hilly streets and taking the time to slow down on such a busy trip and "stop and smell the roses". Vines of wild grapes wrapping their tendrils around the azure facade of various buildings was stunning enough to convince me I was dreaming from time to time. As well as its picturesque views, Chefchaouen is known for its pure, clean drinking water from the stream that runs through the town from the surrounding mountains. Hiking is one of my favorite activities, so I was ecstatic when we had the opportunity to hike to a waterfall (Cascades d'Akchour) during one of our days in Chefchaouen. The most stunning clear blue water you have ever seen flowed over large rocks surrounded by a lush, green forest. I marveled at how truly beautiful nature could be. When our time in Chefchaouen was over, we prepared for what was anticipated to be the most difficult portion of our journey: our rural homestay.

During the car ride to the village of Benikolla, I expected to be extremely nervous to be entering a way of Moroccan life that was almost as far from my life in Naples as you could get. Though to my surprise, I was not nervous at all. Prior to my city homestay in Rabat, I was a nervous wreck before I met my family. I'm a natural worrier but, after my first ten days in

Morocco, I was having so many new experiences that I developed a less tense “go with the flow” attitude. TIA, or “This is Africa” is actually a comical phrase that my entire group adopted when we approached new or mildly uncomfortable situations. Such as, having to wash our laundry in the river when we were in Chefchaouen or, often not having access to western toilets. Upon arriving in the village, we were all greeted and taken home by our respective homestay families. My homestay mother warmly greeted me and showed me to my home for the next five days. I met my twenty-eight year old homestay sister and her two year old son, as well as my grandmother and father. Benikolla was a very rural village, there was no running water, western toilets, air conditioning, or internet access. Even in my city homestay, the only one of these I had access to was running water, so I was better prepared for village life than some other members of my group that had access to more amenities than I did. In the village, it was extremely hot during the day and could sometimes reach 115 degrees Fahrenheit. Despite all of this, Benikolla ended up being my favorite part of the trip because I truly realized the meaning of my program’s theme: “Songs for Peace”. Everyone in the village was passionate about three things: family, music, and food. The village was so small all of our families knew each other. My family was related to two of my friends’ families and our homes were connected. Every night after dinner our large extended family would gather around and encourage us to play music and sing for them. We played familiar songs in Arabic that we all knew and sang along to, as well as American songs. We even had one large village wide jam session with local musicians where we danced, drummed, and sang altogether. I learned that no matter what language it is sang in, music is a universal language capable of crossing any and all barriers and bringing people together. I became very close with my family in the village, especially my nephew and cousins. I spent endless hours having a blast with all of the kids in the village. Whether we were playing

soccer, walking to the local hanut (small convenience store), or just goofing off playing a game we made up-we always had so much fun. My family was eager to learn about my life in America, and they offered to answer any questions I might have about them. My homestay cousin, Mohammed, spoke fluent English and graciously translated conversations between our families. They shared with me that they have been hosting American students in their village for seven years. This entire village was full of some of the most truly generous and kind-hearted people I've ever met. One of my favorite memories in Bennikolla was the last night we spent there. I shared one last meal with my extended family, took pictures with everyone, and performed for them one last time. My host cousin, Selma, asked me to sing an American love song for her so I sang "Halo" by Beyonce. Everyone became emotional and saying how beautiful it was. This was one of those moments when it hit me how music can move people in ways I didn't understand before. Saying that our goodbyes the next morning were difficult would be an understatement. My week in Bennikolla opened my eyes in so many ways. I felt that because I knew these people, I had been changed for good.

After Bennikolla, the remainder of the trip flew by in a beautiful blur. We spent two days in the ancient city of Fes. We visited a tannery and spun tagines at a pottery workshop. The highlight, however, was getting a tour of the Fes medina, which is the oldest in all of Morocco. Its walls and sprawling alleyways have stood for hundreds of years and are protected from modern development as a World Heritage Site. We then bid farewell to Fes and drove south to spend two days in the desert oasis of Marrakech. Marrakech was a beautiful modern city with a rich history. We visited mosques and a palace with lush gardens, Marrakech is known for having the most stunning gardens in the country. Marrakech is also home to the largest and busiest square in North Africa, Jemaa el-Fnaa. It comes alive at night when it's filled with thousands of

people watching street performers and shopping. If you're on a balcony of a building overlooking the square, all of the chaos blends together into a sea of lights. When our time in Marrakech elapsed, we would say goodbye to city life to the next five days and travel to the small village of Boulaouane.

In Boulaouane, we stayed at the Berber Cultural Center, which was a small family-run hostel where its visitors can learn about the culture of Morocco's native Berber culture. We spent much of our time in Boulaouane rehearsing for our final performance in Rabat, which was fast approaching. Otherwise, we were participating in activities around the hostel or enjoying the peace of being far from major cities. We learned to cook a full traditional Moroccan lunch and were assigned different tasks. In my opinion, my job was the most enjoyable because I received the privilege of riding a donkey to the well to fetch water. A local Moroccan band taught us one of their songs to play in our final performance and even had us perform with them in a small show they played in Boulaouane. One day, we took a hike in the woods and the red, mountainous terrain around the hostel to have a picnic with families from the village. That night, we had a bonfire and watched the stars in the clear, starry night sky. On our last night, we learned how to make famous Moroccan mint tea and had a competition to see who could make the best. Much to my, and honestly everyone else's, surprise, I ended up winning. The secret: lots and lots of sugar.

Our final destination was the seaside city of Essaouira. We had our final rehearsals for our performance at the CCCL, and mostly just explored the medina for the two days we were there. With my Moroccan journey coming to a close very soon, I had the realization of how difficult leaving was going to be.

Returning to Rabat was surreal. We were back in the very place our journey had begun. Back to Hotel Darna and the CCCL and the maze of a medina we now knew how to navigate. I was

having constant déjà vu going to familiar places. I remembered the girl who arrived here only four weeks prior, and realized how different she was from the girl that now stared me in the mirror. After a successful final performance, we had our last meal as a group. This was one of my favorite memories from the trip because afterwards, we went around the table and shared our favorite memory and what we loved about each group member. Needless to say, we all cried. I never knew I could grow so close to 8 people in just a few weeks, we became like a family. I would miss: Jordan's hilarious jokes and incredible voice, Ashanti's unique unapologetic personality, Feven's passion for social justice, Randy's constant guitar playing and our engaging conversations, Jailine's friendship and good advice, Isabel's kind heart, Hong's natural talent for anything and everything, and Neysy's natural confidence. I spent my last night in Morocco visiting all of my favorite places in Rabat one last time, and getting both of my hands hennaed with Feven. The next morning, we left for Casablanca and bid a tearful farewell to our Moroccan adventure, and each other. It wasn't easy, but it was time.

I would like to thank the Naples Council on World Affairs profusely for believing in me and providing me with this once in a lifetime opportunity. I don't think I will ever be able to fully put into words how eternally grateful I am. I've experienced a beautiful new culture and made lifelong friendships. I've learned so much about Moroccan culture and experienced the people's unconditional kindness everywhere you go. I learned music is a universal language and allows you to connect with people of all backgrounds. I also learned a great deal about Islam. Our teacher explained to us that Islam is not a religion of hate and intolerance, as many Americans think, but one of love and respect. In the current political climate, this message couldn't be more important to spread. Though I came on this trip to learn about Morocco, I ended up learning

quite a bit about myself as well. I now know that I am so much stronger and independent than I ever thought I could be, and can handle any situation life throws at me.

It seems like a thousand years ago I was lying on that roof in Bennikola. Though I still remember thinking that someday this moment would just be a memory, a perfect moment suspended in time. I think about this often, and it made me appreciate every second I spent in Morocco.