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Volunteer Report: People and Places in partnership with Education for All, Morocco

Teaching English at Dar Asni 3, 29th February -17th March 2020

Wendy Simpson

Pre-departure information was really excellent, I was sent details about EFA, the volunteer handbook and what Dar Asni 3 most wanted me to do. Really useful were previous volunteer reports and contact details. Many thanks to People and Places for this, to Dianne Ashman (who I had the privilege of volunteering with) and to Tina Meadows, a previous volunteer at Dar Asni 2 who was able to brief me about what she had achieved there and what to take with me!

Our flight to Marrakech was delayed, our kind Taxi driver, Omar, had waited 2 hours for us along with a fab EFA volunteer teacher. We arrived at our accommodation, La Vallee Verte, where Maryam and Moad were waiting to help us with cases and some mint tea. They could not have made us more welcome.

On Monday, we had a meeting with all the wonderful House Mothers at Dar Asni 1. Latifa, lead House Mother and in charge of Dar Asni 1, took us on a helpful orientation tour in order to locate Dar Asni 2 and 3, the bank, post office, pharmacy, good food shop and souk. In the afternoon, Khadija, House Mother of Dar Asni 3, introduced me to all her staff: Deputy House Mother, Khaoula; Housekeeper, Khadija; and fantastic chef, Latifa and took me on a tour of the building. It is a lovely and immaculately maintained space, reflecting the team work there and the kind, creative, focused and thoughtful ethos generated by Khadija. The classroom is a pleasure to work in and the computer suite is well used by the students who have the benefit of expert help from Khaoula who has a degree in IT. We had lunch and I was introduced to the lovely students. I was given a timetable with lists of students, which was brilliant.

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In addition to my requested teaching brief and through discussions with Khadija, we were able to focus teaching aims. Khadija wanted academic support for her students so I asked for copies of the Lycée's English Syllabus/Programme of Study so that I could see what the Common Core students and first and second year Baccalaureate students had worked on so far, so that I could

support their schoolwork, as well as build on the work with previous volunteers. This is going to be incorporated into the volunteer handbook being created by Dianne and the House Mothers. I think the syllabus is flexible enough for future volunteers to pick up on topics that students have already covered in school in order to consolidate and enhance learning: it seems to me it doesn't have to be in step with where they happen to be in the syllabus. There are topics and language points which overlap in the syllabi for the three Lycée years which is helpful in classes where there are students from different year groups.

From the timetable, it was clear I would be seeing each student twice a week. Some of the groups repeated but there were variations according to school timetables so Dianne made me an Excel Spreadsheet (it took us some time to remember how to operate one!) so that I could easily see when I had each student and could see where they would be in what we were working on.

In the first lesson, we worked on introducing ourselves and our lives and our dreams: 100% of the Lycée students at the EFA boarding houses went to University last year, which is a real credit to House Mothers and EFA. The range of ambitions was brilliant – from Mountain Guide, to Nurse or Doctor, to Journalist or Astronomer. In the second lesson we began to work on the notion of Culture which is a common thread in the syllabi. Having established what we meant by that, each student chose a topic to pursue: popular topics included traditional music, costume, festivals, food. We used the computer suite to research. I started each lesson with an objective and some key vocabulary. As I listened to them talk, I was able to pick up on grammatical issues they were having problems with and do some work around that too. We wrote a little every lesson in the exercise books provided for volunteers, so that students can remember what they have done with us.

In the second week, Dianne and I found ourselves whisked away by the House Mothers who had arranged for us to go with them to a presentation by 2nd Year Bacc students at the Lycée for International Women's Day. It was a brilliant and fascinating experience: students had

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created drama, a film and a debate around women's lives and their rights. House mothers, maintenance staff, doctors and teachers were presented with certificates. I was introduced to one of their lovely English teachers. Khadija and I thought we might seize the moment and get the girls to research and present something around International Women's Day – it also ties in with themes in the Bacc Syllabus. I gave the students the choice of carrying on with Culture or moving on to this. The Bacc students were keen to move on and most of the Common Core students wanted to carry on with what they were doing.

We read the factsheet and profiles of inspirational women from the IWD website and used their own ideas and Khadija's link from Morocco News to research historical and contemporary role models. For both themes, students began to work towards presentations in poster form or dramatized interviews for television. We were working towards a big presentation in the third week, after school when the news came in that Morocco would be closing schools and shutting down international flights. I sent a summary of what I had planned to do next with Khadija and will attach any resources to this.

The students are fantastic to work with, always so keen to learn, full of fun and curiosity.

On Monday mornings, when students are all at school, having returned from mountain villages, Khadija, Khaoula and I had review meetings. We also explored proverbs: there are lots of inspirational posters around the building. For the staff it helps them to explore



nuances of meaning. We also played a game of proverbs in French (aimed at improving my language skills!). At lunchtimes we painted plant identifiers: Khadija is a keen gardener and her mission was to label them in Arabic, French and English. The garden is lovely – a space for everyone to relax and learn. It was a pleasure to chop food too in the kitchen supervised by Latifa and housekeeper Khadija. Meals are absolutely wonderful – traditional Moroccan cooking. They had much fun teaching me Berber, Amazigh and Arabic. “Ish, ish” for “eat, eat” and “Szwwin” for “delicious” ...at least that is what I think they were teaching me!

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The Boarding Houses are occasionally visited by international groups: whilst I was there a group of journalists from Ireland were escorted by Easyjet and Chris McHugo from the



Kasbah de Toubkal. It was a great opportunity for the students to practise their English and great role models in the young women working as journalists and in charge of PR.

I would absolutely recommend volunteering with People and Places. Sallie and Dianne could not have been more helpful at every stage.

The Vallee Verte Riad, where we stayed is a lovely home from home in many ways. The staff are so helpful and kind. Moroccan Culture is different to the UK and you really only have to ask for anything you need. So for example when it was cold, Dianne needed a heater in her room

and they found her one. We made good friends there and am so grateful for their kindness. Lamps to work by in the evening would be helpful.

We really only had one weekend free, Mike McHugo very kindly invited us stay at the Kasbah de Toubkal which is an amazing experience and well worth a visit. Really beautiful, breathtaking and so friendly. We met up with Chris there and learnt more about EFA and the Kasbah's role in the community.

The highlight of my experience was working with the students and Khadija and her team. As well as eating in the garden with them! My memory is full of laughter, and light and birdsong.

Sadly, our volunteering was shadowed by the rapidly developing coronavirus emergency. In our first week where we persuaded girls and staff to elbow bump and foot greet.

By the second weekend it became clear we would probably have to leave, and with the announcement of school closure which would include all the boarding houses, we realised it was the most responsible thing we could do in the circumstances. I think the last thing you want to be is any kind of liability to your hosts or their country in a situation like this. The House Mothers were to go home to their families too with the exception of wonderful Latifa of Asni 1, who would stay for any EFA volunteers who could not get back. At the time of writing she is there with 2 volunteers from different countries in Africa who are stranded.

I can't praise People and Places enough in the crisis, for the responsible discussions with both Dianne and Sallie, and their partners too: Mike McHugo immediately offered us accommodation at the Kasbah or their sister hotel in Imlil if we were to get stranded, he also put us in touch with a Whatsapp group. We hung on the flight sites until we were able to bring our flight forward and were lucky to get back as countries began to shut down their

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borders. I would like to thank Latifa who arranged our taxi journeys with Omar and worked so hard to get the EFA volunteers home, and to thank him so much for getting a young EFA volunteer and ourselves to the airport in uncertain and changeable times.

Finally, or more au revoir Inshallah, my thanks to Khadija and her lovely team and all the students for making me feel so at home and so welcome. Their work there is so inspiring and it is a pleasure to work with and alongside them. And, thank you for rescuing me when I fell over – that goes for the lovely College and Lycée students who phoned Khadija and held my hand, and the kind nurse and doctor. Dianne, was, as ever, sterling!

Thank you People and Places!

Wendy Simpson 05/04/20

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