

A DIFFERENT LIFE

The Work of Education For All

Education for all

An educated girl educates the next generation.
Help provide a college education for girls in rural Morocco



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***Educate a boy and you educate the man;
educate a girl and you educate
a family, a community, a nation.***

To most of us access to an education beyond primary school never even enters into our consideration; it is simply there, almost by divine right. But what if it weren't? And almost worse still, what if it is on offer but you can't get to it because you live too far from the nearest school or your family is too poor to pay even the basic accommodation costs.

Take a group of friends who like a good meal out, throw in the feeling that they would like to do something to benefit the people of their adopted country – in this case Morocco – season with a bit of inventiveness and see what you get? Education For All.

Mike McHugo was one of this group, and he now has more than thirty years experience of bringing school groups to Morocco.

"We'd all lived in Morocco for a number of years and ate out together regularly. Most of us worked in tourism so we came up with the idea that we would go to a restaurant and get them to provide us with a meal at cost and we would promote them. We then charged ourselves the full rate and paid the balance into a fund, which we would use to support something, although at the time we weren't sure what."

Over a couple of years the account grew, but it was through a chance meeting with John Woods, who had created the charity Room To Read to build libraries in parts of the world where children might never get the chance to see the written word, that saw them focus on education.

"Originally we thought that we might just act as fund-raisers for Room To Read, but then we decided we'd like to do something specific to Morocco. It was quite obvious that girls didn't have the same educational

opportunity as boys, and in addition to that, some of the villages in the High Atlas Mountains are very remote and aren't accessible by road. Children had to walk for hours to even get to the road-head before they might be able to hitch a ride to school."

Homes, not just houses.

GOVERNMENT BOARDING HOUSES have existed for children from outlying districts for many years, but these have to be paid for, and many families in remote villages are simply too poor to pay the fees. Unfortunately, these state boarding houses are often rather Dickensian, and many parents would never consider sending their daughters there. The result is a distressingly high percentage of illiterate women in rural areas, said to be as much as eighty percent in some places.

"We realised from the beginning that we had to be very careful with our approach, once we had decided what we wanted to do," says Maryk Stroonsnijder, who, with her husband Cees van den Berg, has been part of Education For All from the beginning. "We couldn't suddenly start trying to educate children, especially girls, in a staunchly Islamic society, but what we could do was make it easier for some girls to continue their studies within the established school system."

The proposal was that Education For All would provide for the needs of a number of young girls from the poorest families from some of the remotest villages in the High Atlas for the three years it would take them to complete their secondary education. An apparently modest undertaking, but one that would affect the lives of an initial group of twelve girls, increasing by the same number each year, in ways that quite possibly no one had even considered.

In 2006 Education For All was officially recognised as a Moroccan NGO, with a sister charity set up in the UK, and began to raise funds in earnest for their first boarding house in Asni, in the foothills of the High Atlas, forty-five kilometres from Marrakech. This house, and those that were to follow, are all within a couple of minutes' walk of the schools, and take into account an anomaly of the Moroccan way of educational life for girls.





Many boys will cycle to school and take lunch with them. Sometimes a single class will be held in the morning and then another in the afternoon. Boys will simply stay at the school, but it's considered unsafe for girls to do that, so they are expected to return home, impossible if they live far away. Often they've walked considerable distances, and on occasions when timetabling is particularly erratic they'll miss a day's schooling completely. For the girls at the EFA houses they can simply walk across the road.

Ideas are cheap, boarding houses aren't, but after a lot of work and hectic fund-raising, September 2007 saw the first twelve girls from remote mountain villages begin their education in Asni, living in rented accommodation until their purpose-built home was completed.

In the beginning...

IT'S VERY SIMPLE TO MAKE a fleeting comment about someone starting school in a new town, but behind that simple statement is a world of cultural and emotional complexity.

Think of yourself as the father of a young girl not yet even into her teens, and a group of foreigners come along to tell you that you should send her to a private boarding-house miles from home. "It's for her benefit," they say, but you possibly aren't too well educated yourself, and the idea of putting your daughter into the hands of foreigners who aren't part of your culture or religious beliefs might be something you are very wary of. Wouldn't you rather take the counsel of someone of your own faith, a father himself and, even if not a direct friend, someone who has earned the respect of those who know him well?

Hajj Maurice, a small man with a large moustache and a winning smile, is well known and highly respected throughout the villages of the High Atlas Mountains, not just because he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, which entitles him to the honorific 'Hajj', but for the work he has done as a mainstay of the Association Bassins d'Imlil. As the father of two daughters, he was aware of the importance of education for young women, especially following the sad loss of his eldest, who died of leukaemia while in her early twenties. For weeks Hajj Maurice walked the mountains, talking to



fathers and families, trying to convince them that allowing these young girls to live at Dar Asni while continuing their education was not only the best thing for them as individuals, but also for their families, their future children and their communities. Some families accepted with alacrity; the only thing that had stopped them doing it in the first place was that they simply had no money. But others were less convinced, and despite all his wiles and arguments, Hajj Maurice sometimes had to leave without even the concession of "we'll think about it."

Now put yourself in the place of an eleven year-old girl, eager for new sights, friends and experiences, despite never having been outside the confines of your village. You speak only Berber, a language so different from the national language of Arabic in both its spoken and written form that you may as well be going to another country to study, not a village thirty kilometres away, because Arabic is the language all your classes will be in. And then imagine that for the first time in your life you will have your own bed to sleep in, your own cupboard to put your clothes in and a washing machine to wash them – no more going down to the river to pound them on rocks. The boarding house might seem like a palace, but your new life still takes some getting used to!



Going places

AS MARYK HAS BEEN HEARD to comment, "Sometimes when you start something you have no idea where it's going to go," – and before they knew it EFA were a further fifty kilometres into the mountains, converting two apartments in the centre of Talaat-n-Yacoub into another boarding house, Dar Tinmel. Another twelve mouths to feed and energetic girls to look after, on top of the twenty by then living at Dar Asni.

"When we opened Dar Asni it was with the idea that we would take in twelve girls a year for the three-year cycle it took them to complete their studies to take them on to the lycée," says Cees. "To be honest, we needed the experience of the first year to see how the house would work, so we could adapt our plans for the next one."

One of the most important things about Education or All is that a very high percentage of the income and donations comes from people who have visited the houses and seen that they work. No one involved in the administration takes a fee or charges expenses. Apart from the wages paid to the house mother and house staff, and the running costs for each house, the only charges made are bank charges – and there is almost no way in the world of avoiding those!

It's because of this that the house at Ouirgane came into being. When a regular benefactor sold his business and wanted to help in a major way, he asked Education For All how much it would cost to build and fit out a house from scratch. One hundred thousand euros was the answer, with the land being donated by the local authority. On 5 May 2011 Dar Ouirgane had its official opening party, thanks to the generosity of someone who had the confidence in EFA to know that the money would go directly towards those who most needed it.

More than just bricks and mortar

HOUSES ARE IMPORTANT, but there are foundations other than those on which buildings sit which are of equal importance.

"The absolute rock on which everything else stands is the house mother," says Maryk, "and with Latifa Aliza, who was in at the very beginning of Dar Asni, when they were still living in rented accommodation while we waited for the house to be built, we found an absolute gem. She was one of only two educated girls from her village. She left home when she was six years old and, apart from going back for holidays, she was away for sixteen years. She has shown an incredible level of commitment, and it was through her that we found the other house mothers, Khadija Oukattouk and Mina Hadod, when we opened Dar Tinmel and Dar Oiugane, and they are equally as caring and encouraging with the girls in their charge."

While the house mothers are the bedrock of life at the boarding houses, the volunteers who spend up to four months, and occasionally longer, helping the girls at the houses are crucial for the girls' development. Maryk stresses that a stay isn't just an easy ride or something to enhance their CV.

"The volunteers are here for the girls, not the other way around. It can be a bit difficult at first, mainly because of language differences, and particularly at the beginning of the school year when there are a lot of new girls, and the house mothers have to plan timetables for each of the girls and the programme for the house." And it's this careful planning, centred around the girls' education, that explains why eighty percent – more than double the national average – of the girls living at the EFA boarding house





in Asni passed their exams to take them on to study at the lycée.

Every single one of the girls living at Dar Asni, Dar Tinmel and Dar Ourigane has an individual timetable of studies drawn up at the beginning of term to cover the time they are not studying at the college. It's at these times that the volunteers come into their own, supporting the girls as they work and also helping them learn English, one of the most popular classes. Each house has a specially equipped study room, complete with computers with internet connection, which the girls are encouraged to use to broaden their horizons. And their horizons are broadened more than by simply looking at a computer screen. EFA ensures that as often as possible the girls will be off on a jaunt; to Marrakech to take part in a tree-planting, followed by a picnic and games; to paddle in the sea and wiggle their toes in the sand at Essaouira; or to take a ride on a raft made of oil drums at the Cascades de Ouzoud.

Those girls who nervously snuggled up in their first 'own bed' four years ago have just finished their first year at the lycée. They have become confident young women, aware that they have something to offer the world, even if that world should simply extend to the betterment of

their own village. But they pose a quandary. How can you educate a girl and expand her horizons and then simply say goodbye when her three years are done? The answer is, you can't. But neither can they stay at the boarding house, taking up beds that other young girls need. So there really is only one answer – you build another house for the girls from the three houses who are moving on to the lycée. And what about those who want to go on to university? EFA will worry about that in a couple of years' time, meanwhile plans are afoot for that next house in Asni, and quite probably another one after that.

But the reality is that not all the girls will either want to go on to further studies or even be able to.

"We've got to be realistic," says Mike. "There is a drop-out rate, and that's only to be expected, but at least the girls will go back to their villages and be able to offer something, even if it extends no further than making sure their own children get an education. We're looking at trying to provide some form of pre-school education in the villages, and this would be an ideal way for the girls to help their communities. Because surely that's what education is all about. It's not just to make you a clever person, it's to give you the skills and opportunity to help others."



THE STORY DOESN'T END HERE

We hope that this brief story has given you an insight into the important work of Education For All. Over the coming months we will be delving deeper into EFA; the stories of the young girls, the house mothers and volunteers – their fun and frolics, as well as the serious side of EFA's work – so if you would like to keep in touch, or simply because you would like to know what's going on in our corner of Morocco, please register for our newsletters by going to:

www.efamorocco.org

Every year, a group of friends and supporters of Education For All get together for an adventurous fund-raising bike ride into the High Atlas Mountains. We would love for you to join us. To read Derek Workman's light-hearted diary about his bike ride for Education For All, visit

<http://bikemorocco.wordpress.com>

Why not join us next year?

The EFA charity bike ride starts on the last Saturday in March.

For more information visit the Education For All website.

