

Taroudannt January- April 2008

I'm writing this report sitting on the floor of my bedroom here in Morocco. Outside the door my host Moroccan family are going about their daily business. The smell of tagine bubbling away in its clay pot is wafting under my door. I've been here for nearly two and a half months and the novelty of this experience has not worn off.

I wanted to do this project because I wanted to do something positive whilst giving me a better understanding of development work. I would be improving my spoken Arabic at the same as deepening my understanding of Moroccan culture. All this has proven to be true. I and the other volunteer, Auriel, were picked up at the airport and driven down to Taroudannt which is some three hours drive from Marrakech. When I first saw Fouad and Hassan standing at the arrival gates I felt vary wary. 'Oh goodness, here we go' I thought. My experiences dealing with men on my travels in the past have not been entirely positive. I gave them a cautious (weak) handshake and a firm 'as salaam waalaikum'. It's so wonderful to be able to write that not once did I feel uneasy in the company of the members of GMH. Indeed, I've never felt so taken care of. Throughout the three months I knew I could call on any of them if I had a problem and they would be there in an instant.

We were immediately taken to meet our new families and thus into the bosom of the organization. I was very apprehensive about staying in a family where a man was as I felt that things could end up becoming difficult. Every where else it had been so why not here? However, I needn't have worried. Abdullah is so laid back and friendly and hewell he's just great, for want of a better word. I felt right at home in the Soussi household. I feel that there was just the right amount for people in the house for me to not feel lonely. They let me shut the door and have some alone time too. I've noticed that Arabs sometimes don't understand when someone doesn't want to spend every waking hour in a communal fashion. I can't really write enough wonderful things about them actually. They went out of their way to make me feel at home and I did. The idea of leaving them and not being part of their fantastic unit makes me quite tearful!!



We were assigned friends who were to show us around and make us feel at home. I think that that was a good idea. My pal was 19 and I was concerned that the age gap would be too big for us to have anything in common. But Rabab is something else entirely. She's very mature and her English is amazing.... Which mean that I couldn't bear to speak Arabic in front of her. I think that having a friend assigned to you is very helpful especially if you don't mix with your host family very well for some reason. We were also encouraged to join in the activities that are organized for older members of the organization on a Saturday night and for the younger children on a Sunday morning. This was a good idea. However, I didn't go to many of the activities as by the time the weekend came I had things to do or things that I wanted to do. I felt that I had been 'integrating' at work and with my family and I didn't want to go and socialize madly in my free time. Auriel did tend to go and I did sometimes get the feeling that she had been more 'successful' than me at 'integrating'. Perhaps it was more an age gap thing, the other people tended to be her age or younger.

During the first two weeks we had an introductory course in Moroccan culture, dialect and how to go about teaching or caring for the children that would be under our care. We spoke in depth about the difference between Moroccan and British education and ways of bringing up children. We also discussed the conditions we were likely to come across in the orphanage and pre- school we would work in. I really enjoyed these first two weeks and I think it was just the right amount of time to spend getting settled in.

By the time we started work I was prepared and indeed the first two weeks at the preschool sped by. My role was that of teaching assistant to a class of 34 five and six year olds. Very daunting indeed! I did my best to involve myself in the activities and lessons despite the language barrier. The children were only just starting to learn the modern standard Arabic I learnt at university and my Moroccan dialect was (and still is) in its first youth. The most noticeable difference between a British pre school and a Moroccan one was the lack of teaching materials available and by that I mean paint, play dough, games etc. What little there was, was in very short supply and often donated by volunteers. For example, the reading corner had a small supply of much loved scruffy books on a small table. The lack of materials meant that the teacher had to work very hard indeed to keep the children's attention, placing a lot of emphasis on learning by rote and by singing songs. In retrospect, I feel that my time would have been better spent at the orphanage. The children at the preschool had a very set time- table which meant limited free time where I might have come in to do something with them. I think that my Arabic wasn't really good enough to deal with children. They are at an age when one must be clear and precise and appear confident. There are times when I struggle to do these things in English never mind Arabic!

As I felt that my Arabic was not up to teaching the children I decided to give myself a project and breathe some life into the reading corner. I bought new books and made some

transparencies for the windows out of tissue paper. I also made some stars out of card and tin foil and hung them from a long swathe of dark blue material to represent the night sky. The idea behind it was to make the class- room more magical. I also bought paints paper and paintbrushes and we spent a very chaotic afternoon experimenting. The children were so excited to be doing something different. It was a real joy to see their faces as they experimented with the colours.



Beneath the weekly routine of learning lay other issues which I soon became aware of. I, and my host family, often sat up late discussing issues in Moroccan society. Abdullah, is a teacher in a school outside the town and also went on an exchange to London to take part in a summer activity camp for children as part of 'Africa trust'. On several occasions I came home and articulated some of my observations to him. On one such day I came

home and expressed my shock at the appalling state of the school toilets. There are six squat toilets for five hundred students. No one is responsible for cleaning them, there is no soap for the children to wash their hands with and naturally, no toilet paper. That day I had seen some of the preschool children squatting in the doorways of the toilets to relieve themselves as they were too scared to go in to the toilet itself. I imagine this was because the space between the hole and where they place their feet was much too wide for them. Abdullah nodded his head thoughtfully and began to enlighten me to the fact that many schools in Morocco don't have toilets, and neither do a large percentage of the population in their homes. The government is battling massive unemployment, illiteracy among the adult population and trying to build enough schools and find the teachers to teach in them. The last thing on their mind is toilets for the children.

After two weeks I moved to the Lalla Amina orphanage and although we had discussed the work and thought I was prepared from the moment I walked through the door I realized that nothing could prepare me for the sight of those little faces. When we were first taken there on a visit I tried to look at ease to look like I could manage, but actually I wanted to burst into tears! The morning was spent with the babies and toddlers and the afternoon in a house where five young mentally and physically handicapped people live and are cared for. I'm not sure which was the most challenging but I do know that I spent the first week emotionally drained and furious with everything and everybody. From the people who had left their children in the orphanage, to the social pressures that may have forced them to make that decision, from the women who work there and the way they worked to my own emotional reaction to what I was seeing. I wanted to be matter of fact about the work and get on with it but the truth was that I was looking at the situation with English eyes, inexperienced eyes at that. However, I discovered that the bottom line was that these children were safe and fed and have the possibility of a future. The stigma of their birth is slowly changing. Nothing is ever perfect; it isn't in England so why should it be here in Morocco? I also felt really needed at the orphanage, like I was really helping by interacting with the children and though it was draining it was also a fantastic feeling just being there.

One thing that has consistently upset me is the lack of interest shown towards the disabled children. I was very distressed at the beginning of the project but then decided that I had to be practical about it. I started to go to the orphanage a couple of nights a week to give them a massage before bed to try to un-stiffen their joints and also just to give them some attention. The other ladies clearly thought this was very odd and would sometimes hover around me. 'Why are you doing that?' they sometimes asked 'it won't make him walk'. I made a particular effort to take them out of their beds and play with them, hold them or just bring them to where the other children were playing. I had a feeling that they had been excluded for such a long time that they had become objects rather than children. Then suddenly last week I noticed that the other ladies were starting to interact with them more. One boy has the most fantastic laugh and he loves nothing more than being thrown up in the air. When the other ladies saw him laughing I think that it made him more approachable and childlike. This morning I saw one of the girls throwing him up in the air.



Drawing
near to

the end of the project I am trying to sum up what I have learnt. The depth of what one has discovered often does not truly sink until one is back in ones own country. I have traveled and lived in other Middle Eastern and North African countries before but I have never had the chance to really feel a part of a community before. Being born and raised in London I'm not used to meeting people I know at least five times a day! It's amazing to think that I have felt generally happy throughout the three months. The only negative part of the trip has been the usual harassment in the streets which is ok on some days and so annoying on others. I've dealt with it reasonably well and haven't lost my temper.

I have decided that in order to make good use of the knowledge I have gained here and during my degree in Arabic with Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at the University of



Durham, I will apply to do a masters in immigration and refugee studies in London. People have always gone out of their way to explain their culture and make me feel at home when I've been abroad. In the future I feel that I will be able to return the favor to those arriving in my country. It is only left for me to thank Africatrust Networks for arranging the project, visiting us and making sure we're doing well. I would also like thank GMH as an organization, what they do is an inspiration and they have bent over backwards for us. To the Soussi family, who I love dearly. To my Arabic teacher Karima, who sat through my hideous mistakes and opened my mind to all sorts of new ideas. She is a fabulous woman. Thank you to my friend and fellow companion Auriel who shared these wonderful three months with me and made me laugh. Last and not least I want to thank my parents and friends for encouraging and supporting my adventures, past, present and future inshallah.....