

The Transformative Experience of Other Cultures

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During the summer of 1997, as a rising senior at Converse College, I had the opportunity to study Arabic at the Arabic Language Institute (ALIF) in Fez, Morocco through the National Council on U. S. Arab Relations Passage to Morocco program; a three week program sending college students from different regions of the United States to the country to live with families and study modern Standard Arabic. At first, neither the staff at the National council nor Dr. Joe Dunn, my politics professor, was sure I could participate since I am blind. Their biggest concerns were could the Arabic Language Institute accommodate me academically, and would a Moroccan family feel comfortable hosting a blind student. After several weeks of waiting in anticipation for answers, I learned through Dr. Dunn that I would study Arabic one-on-one with an instructor at ALIF, and a Moroccan family would host me!

To prepare for the experience, I read many articles about Morocco and asked the staff at the council question after question about my family. The staff, based on what they knew, could only tell me that I would live in a home where one of the members was also blind. Upon my arrival in the country, my host brother, Adil, greeted me with his teenage brother, Redouane, at ALIF. Redouane, who could see, patiently guided me and Adil through the busy streets of the city to take the bus to my new home. As I settled in over the first few days, feelings of deep sadness, frustration, and confusion consumed me. Ill prepared to understand what I was feeling, I cried a lot and relied extensively on my American group mates from the National Council to guide me through the town when my family were not with me and to comfort me.

Knowing little about the range of emotions that could take hold of a person, especially when traveling abroad to a developing nation for the first time, my group mates explained to me that what I was going through was culture shock. As time passed and I became more accustomed to my new surroundings and more accepting of life in my home, I set out to walk short distances alone using my cane and to know my Moroccan family better. I also worked hard in Arabic class to learn as much as I could. I recorded lessons and studied them later.

By the time I came back to the states, the hardships and the easy things, as well, had entirely transformed my self-confidence and my outlook on life! I now wanted to become even more independent in my studies and daily living skills as a blind person and to have an organization that would provide youth anywhere in the world with scholarships for higher education to the states. I also wanted to teach English abroad to youth to help broaden their language skills and work opportunities. My new visions would lead me to go back to Morocco in 1998 to continue learning Arabic and to earn a masters in Applied Linguistics from the University of South Florida. My life-changing experiences would also lead me to speak about them in public and to dedicate an entire chapter about them in my recently published book, *From Darkness to Triumph; Creating Success Amidst Barriers*. To learn more or to contact me, please email a.charalabakos@gmail.com.