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YES Abroad and Amideast

After 9/11 the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study program began its mission in bridging the gap between the United States and countries of significant Muslim populations. Sponsored by the US Department of State 65 students are sent to 13 countries. I was sent to Morocco along with 5 other girls to study with Amideast. Amideast works with the Middle East and North Africa. They teach English, Arabic and prepare individuals, companies and organizations for the global economy.

I was based at one of these English schools in Rabat. There I had French, Arabic and Darija tutoring along with a global citizen class. This is also where I would meet with my local coordinator, Outman. He was in charge of almost everything we did in county, he organized weekend and after school activities and was our support system if we were struggling.

Life Abroad

I've been dreaming of my year abroad since middle school. This year I finally got the chance to go to Morocco! Upon arrival, it felt like I had stepped out of the fog of oblivion and into the light. Morocco instilled within me a new energy and curiosity for life. Through the highs and lows, I cried a lot, laughed even more and probably learned the most. This year has been everything unexpected and better than I could have imagined.

Flying out for my year abroad, I knew the name of where I would land, but little to no details of what it was like. I had googled "Rabat" and got one photo of the Oudayas. That has since become one of my favorite places in Morocco amongst other discoveries that I couldn't have imagined. I didn't want to set too many expectations for my year abroad but I had two goals. I wanted to improve my French and change as a person. I mostly wanted to come out of the small town, quiet, shy girl box, that I had put myself in throughout

middle school. I needed to know who I was outside of my comfort zone and the only home I've know for the first sixteen years of my life.

The moment I knew I had achieved this, was speaking in front of the State Department. Before returning home we had two days in Washington D.C. to debrief. One of those days was spent presenting on our year to the people who fund our program. In the beginning of the year, I would have been so nervous and lost for words. I would have let the other members of my cohort do all the talking for me. That day in D.C. I was completely in the room, organized in my thoughts and really expressed myself professionally. My cohort was so proud of me because they had seen how much I'd grown and I was entirely thankful for them.

I don't know how I would have gotten through the year without my cohort. We learned and went through everything together. Even when we were learning personally who we were at our rawest states. That rawest state being completely exhausted, from being pushed so far out of our comfort zones. I hope to carry out the importance of these relationships into my future. Morocco has taught me what is truly valuable in life. I will work to integrate those values into my life and hopefully the community around me.

Transferable Skills

Effective and Expressive Communication

Living on an exchange year abroad meant taking on the role of a Youth Ambassador. Ambassadors are to represent their own culture, while understanding the mindset of their host culture. An example would be: Americans wear shorts but I would respectfully not wear them in country as it is more conservative. This was to not shock or extremely differentiate myself from my Moroccan peers. I would communicate the American way of life as positive and truthfully as I could. Apart of our Volunteering hours, my cohort and I went to English schools around the country and presented on American education. Since we attended Moroccan schools we were able to effectively compare and contrast the two systems.

Informed, Integrated and Critical Thinking

A big theme that I learned abroad, was to not live by one story. This means to acknowledge all perspectives. Many Moroccans may have only heard one story of the American way of life. They may only have the ideas of movies and media. As exchange students we are there to tell the real story and multiple of them at that. Because the average American does not exist. The diversity that we know in the U.S. is not as visible around the world. So we are there to express the possibility of diversity. To learn about Moroccan perspectives we met as many people as possible. It was difficult at times not generalize, just for the benefit of an easy explanation. But culture has no easy explanation. We were there to learn the influences, what shapes culture and how we can find a middle ground.

World Languages

Communication

1a. To express myself I did a presentation on beauty standards in Morocco. With minor errors I spoke for ten minutes. I did four drawings to capture different identities and described them. My research described American beauty standards, specifically Bi-Racial beauty and Gender fluidity. These identities are rare in Morocco, so I thought they'd be important to share and educate on. I also discussed the influence media has on Moroccan beauty. In modern cities like Rabat there is a visible transition from traditional beauty to westernized looks. I discussed the products and adds that influence this and how Americans should acknowledge this.

1b. On a day to day basis I would speak French with my host family, friends and teachers. This meant upholding conversations on a broad range of topics. I would consider my French to be conversationally fluid and working towards fluency. I also interviewed my host mom in French about cooking, for my journal entry 2.

1c. I would often Journal my experiences abroad in French. These were usually daily reflections and analyzations. An example would be the entry I did on being harassed, I wrote describing the interaction and then how I felt about my reaction.

1d. I read two books with my Moroccan school; La Boîte à merveilles and Antigone. I would also often read news articles in French, with the TV5Monde app. If I had printed articles I would bring them to class and study vocab using flashcards and dictionary.

Literacy

Expository Writing

Throughout the year I kept a blog and a personal Journal. I would blog occasionally with big ideas and things I had learned about. I would also make monthly vlogs as fun visuals to share with people back home. My personal journal was where I wrote more extensively on tougher ideas. Such being: dealing with harassment, relationships back home, friends I was making in country and just general times that were hard, like feelings of homesickness.

Expository Research Writing

I did two major research papers throughout the year. My mid-year comparative narrative and capstone paper. My mid-year was to be on a controversial topic because it was only going to be presented in our Global Citizen class. I did mine on womens expression through clothing, but more so on what it is like to wear a hijab in Morocco vs. the US. I interviewed my language partner Rajae, who experienced the process of taking the hijab off. I also interviewed a women's rights advocate, working in Rabat. My capstone paper extended of this topic to beauty standards. I wrote extensively on how the US and media influences today's beauty ideals in Morocco. I created four drawings for visuals and interviewed many Moroccans.

Global Citizen

Civic Literacy

1b. Twice a month my cohort and I would meet for a Global Citizen class. We would come having read articles on difficult ideas, then discuss as a group our interpretations. This process was to relate issues we may have been dealing with in country to a global sense. It was also a time hear different points of view, because the 7 of us (my cohort and teacher) grew up all over the US with different backgrounds and values.

1c. A recurring psychologist that we would return to the studies of was *Geert Hofstede*. He studied concepts around culture, that gave us mapped out ideas, explaining what we were going through. For week 8 and 9 we were assigned 4 chapters from his book *The Concept of Culture*. I read *He, She and (S)he* and presented the main ideas.

1d. Throughout the year we were assigned two Ethnographies. This is where we would record in a double sided journal. On one side would be quotes or moments and the other side would describe, reflect and interpret.

Culture

5a. Journal entry 1 was to reflect on important ideas in the articles we were reading. Those articles discussed ideas of how to approach another culture, how to overcome language barriers and what mindset our own culture has shaped us to be in.

5b. Journal entry 2. I interviewed my host mom on her cooking style and how it has shifted from traditional to modern.