

*Unity Through Songs for Peace*

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2019 SDC Morocco Songs for Peace

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I kept a promise to myself that I was going to become a sponge during my endeavor to Morocco. I tried to be the absolute spongiest throughout my incredible journey. As my SDC group, an unlikely bunch of 10 teenagers brought together by a love of music, adventure and our efforts to prepare to be the first in our families to go to college, gathered in a circle for our last performance, I looked out to each individual person and saw how truly grateful I was to be part of such a unique experience. I looked out to the families watching and I was reminded of amazing hospitality I experience from my hosts. I looked out and I saw the people who have come to be my second family. Never before had I had a closer connection with complete strangers from all over the United States, not to mention Morocco. The SDC Songs For Peace program was extremely humbling to say the least. Since my return home I've been more aware of my roots and the decisions of why I first applied to the scholarship - peace and unity.



The main focus of our endeavor was to use music to explore Moroccan culture and build connections. As a musician, my absolute passion is not surprisingly - music. Being able to not only see but participate in different musical tastes from a country like Morocco, and from all different types of regions within Morocco, was a once in a lifetime experience. While this was a focus, I could not have imagined how grand of an impact the environment of Morocco would have had on me. From learning basic Moroccan Arabic, to bargaining in the Medina, hiking to a Moorish Spanish mosque, to exploring the deep wilderness of the Atlas Mountains, to seeing the children of Morocco in classrooms and outside, to walking on the beach late at night with an incredibly talented group of individuals I now call my dearest friends, I feel as if I have made a second home in Morocco. The songs we learned and performed in Arabic, Berber, French and Spanish spread peace and unity - something I will continue to do here in Colorado.

Although I was hesitant at first of the distinct culture of Morocco, I soon came to accept it as my own. I had gotten so accustomed to only eating with my hands that when I came “home” to Colorado I was uncomfortable using any utensil. From the weekly couscous to the street “North African Tacos”, I devoured everything that came near my plate. Any of my peers could vouch for that. It was as if the immersion of the Moroccan culture motivated my endless hunger for new, interesting experiences. This mentality inspired the unique motto that my SDC group followed throughout the entirety of the program - “when in Morocco”. If you felt like something was out of your comfort zone, try to at least experience it.

This mentality got me to overcome my fears and get into the ocean between Spain and Morocco, something I won't soon forget.

However, not everything came so easily to accept, but I'm content that I was able to adapt so I could experience all that was possible. The Hammam, public steam baths, were daunting at first for a person so used to privacy in bathrooms back home. At the start of the program, I was still skeptical of the Turkish toilets. Directly after unpacking at my homestay, my host father named Bouaza guided me to the Hammam. There was no way for me to communicate my refusal to my new pops, however, I reminded myself of the promise I made myself from the start. Become a sponge and in this case it was quite literal. After spending what seemed at least a couple hours inside the steaming Hammam, I felt the cleanest I had ever felt in my entire life physically and psychologically. There's a special bond between people through this activity. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined being scrubbed down by a complete stranger in another country. Soon after I came to see Bouaza as one of the few father figures in my life, and even though I wasn't comfortable with the activity at first, I'm glad it became a reality. The Moroccan experience just wasn't complete without the Hammam.



Never before in my life have I been surrounded by such a talented group of people that encompassed a unique perspective and skill in life. I felt the warmth of a real family with them and during my homestays. I've come back to treasure my roots as Hispanic even more and I have gained a broader perspective of the world. I'm confident in saying that I left a piece of myself in Morocco and because of this experience, I deeply value service and perspective. From our first *salaam-alaikum* to our last *beslama*, I have connected with amazing people, of which I have stayed close contact with, and with breath-taking places. I will forever be humbled and reminded. I am deeply grateful, and I intend to go back to see my Moroccan family and friends in the future and continue to be a sponge.