

# Students discuss trip to Morocco, make action plan from what they learned

By Alisha George Times Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, August 7, 2013 12:00 am



Lawrence Smith had to get used to eating with his hands when he visited Morocco last week. His host family didn't use plates, either.

Now that he's back in the United States, the habit of eating with his hands has been a hard one to kick, according to Smith, a senior at Winters Mill High School.

"The food was amazing," he said. "They would just gather around and share different dishes."

The students from Higher Learning Inc. are back from their trip to Morocco and are now focusing on how they can use what they learned to better themselves and their communities.

Higher Learning Inc. took 10 students to Morocco from July 25 to Aug. 2. The purpose of the trip was for the high school students to learn about what people are doing in the country to address inequality and social problems as well to broaden their cultural knowledge and experience.

The group stayed with different host families in Morocco's capital city, Rabat, according to Roxanna Harlow, founder and executive director of Higher Learning Inc.

Higher Learning Inc. is a nonprofit that provides active educational programming for youth ages 11 to 17 in the Maryland area.

The students had a great time learning about Ramadan, meeting with officials from organizations working to make a change in the country and hanging out with Moroccan teens, Harlow said.

"They really enjoyed talking to them and having fun with them," Harlow said.

One of the most enjoyable experiences for the students was painting a mural outside of a Moroccan hospital. The facility is a place that is frequented by women and children, so they were working on different efforts to beautify the building, she said.

The group also visited Morocco's National Council on Human Rights to learn about what the organization is doing to address human rights issues in the country. The speaker also talked about the United States and how the country is sometimes a leader of human rights, but then consistently violates human rights in other countries, Harlow said.

The students visited a health organization that works to reduce teen pregnancy and abortions.

A great experience was staying with the host families, Harlow said. One day, the students fasted along with the host families to see first-hand what it was like to take part in Ramadan.

“Things came alive at night,” she said. “They were up all night long.”

While there were many cultural differences between the United States and Morocco, there were also similarities, Harlow said. Teens there also used Facebook often and spent a lot of time on their smartphones.

The country is conscious of conserving water and people go to public baths about once a week, Harlow said.

Before the trip, students took two days to prepare and learn more about Morocco through research and guest speakers. After the trip, they met Monday and Tuesday to debrief and discuss how they are going to use what they learned to start a new program.

In the debriefing sessions, students made charts and PowerPoint presentations about what they learned in Morocco. They also wrote thank-you letters to those who donated to Higher Learning Inc. and funded their trip abroad.

They learned on the trip about how Morocco funds the education of their young people. Even though they pay for education through college, unemployment is very high, Harlow said.

The students formulated an action plan to help make college more affordable for Higher Learning Inc. alumni.

The students decided they will raise money by selling candy at their schools and church communities. They have a goal to earn \$1,500 in the next year.

Others in the group agreed with Smith that they enjoyed the food in Morocco. The families would break fast with dates and tomato soup, and then enjoy an entire spread of food.

Winters Mill junior Michael Arthur said he really liked meeting new people and learning about their daily lives.

He learned a lot about the changes people are working to make in Morocco.

“It inspires you to make the same pushes in your community,” he said.

Cashannah Costley, a freshman at Winters Mill, said it was her first trip abroad with Higher Learning Inc.

Others in the group have gone with the nonprofit to Nicaragua and Mexico.

She enjoyed getting to know the other students and exploring a foreign country.

“It makes us feel more like a family,” Costley said.

It was interesting how people in Morocco often knew more than one language, when that’s often not true in the U.S., she said. She was happy to get to know her host family.

“They kind of took us in with open arms,” she said.

Smith said there was often a language barrier when talking to Moroccans, even though they did receive lessons in Arabic. Often the group would communicate with common phrases and hand gestures.

It was fun to explore Morocco, and Smith said he would recommend for anyone he knows to visit the country.

“There are so many cultures in one,” he said. “I learned a lot from it.”