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Sent: Tuesday, December 07, 2010 4:43 AM
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Subject: Kelly Combs, Morocco Update 8

Happy New Year, everyone! Today marks the start of the Islamic new year. What does that mean for me? No school! Woo-hoo! The strange thing was that we didn't know if today or tomorrow would be the new year until late last night through an e-mail from the university. The Islamic calendar is based on the lunar cycle, and depending on when the moon is sighted, it signals the start of a new month and thus a new year. (I thought Morocco would have this down to a science after 1432 years!) Also, there has been no black-eyed-pea eating or party-throwing. It's just another day (except no school!)

Speaking of holidays, for the actual Thanksgiving Day several American students, faculty, and staff gathered at a professor's apartment and ate all the holiday food I'd forgotten how much I've missed. Everyone brought something –turkey and dressing, pumpkin pie, green bean casserole –you name it, it was there. I went back for fifths! Although there were nearly 50 people in the little apartment, it didn't feel cramped- just cozy. In one of the bedrooms a computer was set up, streaming a football game off the internet. Another room was designated the “kids room,” with little tables and crafts set up for children of the faculty and staff. And the rest of us were back and forth between the living room and the kitchen! It was a really nice experience. Afterwards, I returned to campus and Skyped my family at their Thanksgiving.

Apart from these holidays another special event that happened recently was the invitation of the master's students in international studies and diplomacy to Parliament and the Moroccan Foreign Ministry in Rabat (about three hours away). At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (like our State Department) we sat at a long, leather topped conference table, so vast that I had to lean over the table if I wanted to see the speaker. As the representative spoke in Moroccan Arabic, one of my friends was nice enough to whisper the translations to me. He spoke to our group for about an hour (wow!) about Moroccan relations with the rest of the world. His talk was mostly just normal politician babble, you know, saying a lot without saying anything at all. However, I found it ‘diplomatically’ interesting that he did specifically say that Algeria is an enemy to Morocco, but that Morocco realizes the countries need each other for trade. Yet, he said, Algeria refuses this notion. Also he said to the other students, obviously not to me (I'm the only American in the program), that if they wanted to work at the Foreign Ministry they had to believe and espouse the idea that the disputed southern provinces of Morocco are indeed part of Morocco and not what the U.S. calls the territory: the Western Sahara.

After his talk we shuffled over to McDonald's for lunch (or as my friends say it: MacDoh's) and then walked across the street to Parliament. Small world, huh! As we entered I was surprised that nobody in our group had to choose between the pat-down or the full body scan! There were not even metal detectors; we just had to don visitor lanyards. We toured the building, which was basically empty (Parliamentarians are only in session two days a week). Some of us got lost! (the building is surprisingly big and ornate for a population of 30 million, it seems to go on forever). We were supposed to meet with the president of the Senate. However, when a representative from the opposing political party began to engage our group, the president's secretary, who was showing us around, acted like she answered her cell phone. Then in her high pitched voice she said, “Oh, oh, we

have to go. The president's here!" So we all shuffled out and went into another part of the Parliament. We waited an hour and a half, and the president never showed. She just didn't want us talking to the opposing party! It was pretty funny once we realized what happened.

Talking with my fellow students some of them told me the stereotype about the Parliamentarians is that their role is in name only. They are largely absent from the scene, and when they are present they aren't very active. The Parliament basically rubber stamps the policies the king wants to enact. Maybe this isn't true, but it's generally the idea I received when talking to the other grad students.

During this time of the year I'm used to seeing Christmas lights up on homes, holiday family programs on t.v., and people generally in cheerier moods. But here, things have just been, well normal. On Sunday the university opened its gates to the community (the only time it does so all year). Sub-Saharan African choirs from all around Morocco came and sang Christmas carols as the auditorium was filled with the smell of fresh fur branches and holly berries that lined the stage. I even helped decorate a Christmas tree. Since I'm in a country that doesn't celebrate Christmas, it has provided me a time of reflection during this Advent and has made it that much more obvious why I celebrate the reason for the season, separating myself from the hustle, bustle, and advertisements that normally dominate our culture during this time. I think I'm in the Christmas spirit. I hope you are, too. Have a great rest of your week and happy holidays.

-Kelly

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