

Speech: Chef Moha shows the way

Last Wednesday, I was in Asni, a small village in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains at one of the Education for All dormitories. Those of you who have read my blogs before will know about EFA, but for those who have not, a quick explanation.

In many rural communities, girls stop going to school at the age of 12, as secondary schools frequently have 'gaps' in their daily timetable (so a pupil may have classes from – for example – 0830 – 1000, but then no classes until 1300). Whilst it may be OK for a boy to roam the streets whilst they are not in classes during those 'gaps' it is less socially acceptable for a girl to do so. This results in many girls not going to school. EFA is tackling this problem by building dormitories for the girls near to their schools. The dormitories are run by house mothers who make sure that the girls get well-fed, schooled and looked after.

But life is hard for the girls. When the first EFA dormitory was established 10 years ago, it was hard to persuade families to allow their girls to go. Now demand far exceeds supply as the benefits of education all the way up to the age of 18 become increasingly clear (83% of EFA girls go on to university – a strikingly high figure!) so EFA have had to apply very strict criteria to their intakes. Only the girls from the poorest families in the poorest villages are admitted to the dormitories.

Two months ago, I was sitting in Chef Moha's restaurant in Marrakesh chatting to him about another project, when it occurred to me that if he were to offer a cooking Master Class for the girls, it would be a ray of light in their lives. Chef Moha did not even hesitate. "Yes. When?" was his immediate reply.

Fast forward to last Wednesday.

I stayed in the Kasbah Toubkal on the Tuesday evening, a fabulous hotel which is beautiful at the best of times. But in the snow, it takes on a magical aura. You feel as if you are cut off from the rest of the world, perched on an outcrop at the end of the valley. To the right, higher up into the Atlas, the shoulders of Toubkal himself jut up into the sky, white-clothed and robed in snow, he is a wonderful mountain – I look forward to climbing him soon. To the left, the valley has a wonderful Spartan feeling – like something out of Ten Years in Tibet. The air is pure and clean and the night skies something else. If you haven't yet been: go!

On the Wednesday morning, we drove down to Asni, arriving before the lorry bringing the provisions, tables, cookers and plates. Chef Moha rang to say he was en route. Though the dormitory was sleepy, you could sense the anticipation rising. The lorry arrived and the girls, Embassy team and Dar Moha employees formed a line, like ants scurrying back and forth from the entrance to the kitchen. Soon the kitchen was full to overflowing and still the provisions rolled in.

A cheer went up: Chef Moha had arrived. The Dormitory filled like the tide coming in – imperceptibly until you looked and the room was full to bursting. The tables were laid out – 10 girls had been chosen as the Master Class pupils. I was chef Moha’s sous-chef. The girls were so excited, it was absolutely wonderful.

I was very nervous. Although I bake bread and croissants and enjoy cooking, I would not call myself a chef. Cooking with such a luminary was very scary!

But Chef Moha made light of it all. Barking out instructions. Laughing and joking with the girls. Twirling ingredients and dropping dollops of magic onto the food. Before I had a chance to really take it all in, the food was cooked and ready.

Food for 150 girls and a dozen or more hangers-on appeared. Tables were laid. Plates and glasses brought. Food was served. It was all so slick and beautifully done, that I didn’t really even notice how it was done. The girls and guests sat down to the most wonderful food.

But it was not the food that I will take away – delicious though it was. There were two other things which had a bigger impact on me. Chef Moha gave us a lesson in much more than cookery. He is a mega-star in Morocco. Everyone I speak to has heard of him. Yet never, not for one second, did he exude any of the prima-donna type behaviour we have come to expect from mega-stars. He was modest, down-to-earth. Humble. He took selfies with the girls. Put up with my mindless banter with great good humour. He laughed, joked and set the whole dormitory on fire with happiness. That is real leadership. He is a true Ambassador for Morocco. A person to be proud to know and be humbled by his selfless generosity.

And the other thing was the happiness of the girls. I have never seen 150 people look so utterly blissed-out happy for such an extended period of time. They loved it. When they burst into a spontaneous song of thanks to the Chef, it brought tears to my eyes – literally. It was such a simple thing to do, but it brought so much pleasure and enjoyment to so many people who don’t have many joys in their lives: they brushed shoulders with a mega-star and he embraced them with his warmth. It was glorious and it reminded me of how much in our daily lives we take for granted.

And that brings me back to EFA. Many of us take universal education for granted: we should not. We should remember how lucky we are.

What could possibly be more important than ensuring that girls get a decent education up to the age of 18? Giving them that enables them to realise their own potential. Failing to do so risks locking them into a cycle of poverty, early marriage and lost potential, potentially robbing a country of the economic potential of 50% of its population.

EFA offers girls a route out of that cycle. The lives of the girls at EFA have been and will be transformed by the power of education. EFA offers them and their communities an exciting, new and different future, releasing their potential for the benefit of Morocco. That is why I am proud to support EFA

and why I was so happy to have been able to bring a little bit of joy and happiness into the hard lives of 150 young people yesterday.

The British Embassy is proud of its ongoing association with EFA. We will be entering a team into the Marrakesh Atlas Etape on 22 April which is raising funds for EFA. More details are at: <https://www.marrakech-atlas-etape.com/>. We look forward to seeing you on the course!

More generally, helping girls to continue their education is essential for Morocco's economic development, so if you have ideas about how we can help, please get in touch and let us know!