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News | Classifieds | Community | Directory | Shopping | My Zwire!

Wednesday 25 August, 2004 | Home > News > News > Features

- News
  - Headlines
  - Editorial/Letters
  - Obituaries
  - Sports
  - Real Estate
  - Entertainment/Events
  - Features
  - HOT TOPICS!
  - Time of your life
  - Weather
  - TV Listings
  - AP News
  - National News
  - Business
  - Unsolved Murder Archive
  - Cecil Almanac
  - HARFORD
- Our Newspaper
- Visitors Guide
- Sports Wire!
- Links
- Business Directory
- Community
- Fun and Games
- Consumer Guide
- Personal Finance
- Lifestyles
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## Features

### Learning about us in the U.S.

By: Jane Weaver , [jweaver@cecilwhig.com](mailto:jweaver@cecilwhig.com)

08/24/2004

#### He found out the books were wrong.

**Youssef Najah, a 49-year-old Moroccan man, came to America this summer to be a better teacher. Through the University of Delaware, Najah spent six weeks immersed in American culture.**

#### At his home in Marrakech, Najah teaches teachers.

"I train teachers on methods of teaching English," he said. "Most Moroccans speak at least three languages."

There are two principle languages spoken in the north African country -- Arabic and Berber. In school, students learn other languages.

"They learn French at 8 and English at 16," Najah said.

Since Morocco has so much Spanish influence, Najah said he and many of his countrymen also speak that language. He found that the English he learned, and was teaching to some 100 teachers under his charge, was not the English spoken here.

"It took me 20 days to settle in and get used to the cadence of the language," he said.

Not to mention the subtle differences in everyday words like restroom.

"I was asking, 'Where is the toilet?'" he said.

A janitor at U.D. clued him in that the word was "restroom."

"Don't worry," the janitor assured him. "You will learn to speak English here."

"There is a way of speaking, and the nature of American life and culture which is



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different from what we read in our books," Najah said.

For example, he expected to find "a society of plenty."

"We learned (from textbooks) that everyone in America has two or three or four of everything; more than they need. But I found out they are like everywhere else," he said. "We thought to be an American is to have plenty of everything. It's not true. There are rich people, poor people; it changed our view."

Another notion of Americans also fell.

"We thought to be an American means to be arrogant, stand-offish, wary of strangers," he said, adding, "That turned out to be a major fallacy."

He found most Americans to be friendly, eager to help and even more eager to learn from him.

Najah said while he was casting off his stereotypes of Americans, he hoped the Americans with which he interacted came away with a more accurate view of his people as well.

"There is a misunderstanding of the true faith of Islam," Najah said.

While he is no longer a practicing Muslim, Najah said he knows it to be a faith that preaches peace and tolerance. He said the terrorists seen in the news "do not represent Islam."

Najah said the media and the governments back home also paint a distorted view of America.

"It's very sad," he said, "The whole population has their idea of a people from the mass media or through foreign policy."

These matters were the subject of much debate at the popular hangouts around the college campus.

"I did have a number of discussions at the tavern," he said.

Part of his exchange student experience was getting out of the dormitory and living with a host family for two weeks. Najah spent two weeks in Rising Sun living with the Jentzsch family.

Tracy and Karl Jentzsch welcomed Najah to their home so he could experience a real American household and daily life. He went with them to breakfast at Sue's Restaurant, to the Rising Sun library and other locations to take in as many experiences as possible.

"I went with the Jentzschs to church a few times. I liked the service very well," he said, pointing out that Christianity and Islam "are similar in their teachings 90 percent of the time."

He said one thing he has missed from home is the food. He has sampled the fast food fare and homemade American cuisine.

"There is always plenty but it is bland," he said, explaining that he prefers the spicy foods served at home.

"Tracy tried to cook food I like," he said. "I like her cous cous a lot ... more than anything else."

She also made a fine tebbula -- a dish made with grains, vegetables and spices.

"I did eat a lot of it," he said.

As he prepared to head out of Rising Sun for a week in Washington D.C. -- the last leg of his journey before heading home -- Najah was packing books he had collected. Some came from his studies at the college. Others he purchased for use in teaching the teachers of English in Marrakech.

They included learning games, workbooks and textbooks. He also purchased some books on American culture and an English language dictionary.

He knows he will be changing the way he teaches his students. He won't just be teaching them how to speak the language.

"I will be teaching culture, not only language but reading, writing, plus speaking and some of the religious teachings," he said.

He hopes some day to be able to bring his family to America for a visit.

"Most Moroccans like to travel," he said. "But they don't want to live anywhere else."

Overall, Najah described his experiences in the United States as positive.

"I would say no, I wouldn't change anything," he said. "It's been a very good experience."


From now on, wherever he goes, he will go in search of information about other people, other cultures, other religions.

"It's very important for me that other people -- Muslims and Christians, American, Moroccan, Japanese, Chinese -- that they see we have more points to agree on than to disagree on and make it a calling for people to join in their efforts to make this a better place to live."

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