

MY SIXTH RAMADAN AND STILL AT IT

by Mary Bruce

If I thought it was going to be easy, I wouldn't have joined the Peace Corps. If it had been easy, I wouldn't have stayed.

My first Ramadan, during Pre-Service Training, I nearly passed out. Massively dehydrated from inexperience, I brought a bottle of water to a session and got a nasty secret note from a fellow volunteer about my cultural insensitivity. That was heartening.

My second Ramadan, I had the bright idea of hosting English Language Movie Nights at the dar chebab and 45 students showed up. Success! Then, half the students talked through the movie so the other half got angry. A fight broke out. I thought, "Am I going on the next plane home?"

Then, my third Ramadan. The latrine project I was working on came to a complete standstill and I began planning the details of an emergency extension to my service. Turns out construction can be delayed due to fasting, and promptly resumed after Aid Kbir.

My fourth Ramadan, at grad school, I joined the Muslim Student Union for fun. Most were international students, looking homesick and longing for their mother's cooking. Me, too. Shebekia, herera, and hard boiled eggs.

And now, my sixth Ramadan, when I break fast with my friend Mona and her extended community in Boston, her friends ask "Wesh kat slli? (Do you pray?)" I explain that I'm not Muslim, and go on to tell them about the shebekia, the herera and the hard-boiled eggs. And the latrine project and my wonderful counterpart who navigated a ridiculous system and it-was-really-all-his-work-I-just-showed-up-for-the-couscous stories. My incredible students, who wrote poems about peace, brought their little brothers to class and invited me over for dinner, and lunch—and dinner again. One student, Fatima, just found me on Facebook and is teaching now, isn't-that-the-most-wonderful-thing-you've heard?

"And what was your job?" Mona's friends ask. I laugh and think "what

wasn't my job?" when I had to explain for the 9 millionth time to the random hanut owner in some remote bus stop the Three Goals of Peace Corps. In my 26th month of service I struggle to pronounce "ma-tu-ta-why-ya," which he finally understands the third time I say it, sounding the same as it did the first time I said it years ago, as far as my American ears can tell.

"And what about now? What do you do for work?" I work for a national nonprofit, dedicated to ending summer learning loss. According to a recent John Hopkins University study, summer learning loss is responsible for 75% of the educational achievement gap between white and black students. We provide children across the nation academic and enrichment opportunities. Our scholars achieve two months of learning gains over the summer, instead of losing three. They play soccer, paint murals and visit local universities. Not too different from the Peace Corps language programs we coordinated each spring and summer for children from villages in the foothills of the Middle Atlas and the big cities by the coast.

Like the Peace Corps, my job is hard. And I love it. We're growing to serve over 50,000 children annually, but we're not there yet. So I work long hours, and don't get enough sleep, and have to, for the 9 millionth time, explain the Goals of the Organization.

More than 30% of children do not know how to hold a book when they enter kindergarten. In our urban schools, more than 50% drop out before graduating from high school.

If I thought it was going to be easy, I wouldn't have started this work. If it were easy, I wouldn't still be at it.

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Mary Bruce in Afouer, Morocco during her Peace Corps service, 2006.