

## June 2008

What an exciting Algerian adventure!

Our Algerian experience actually began when I, as President of the Elkader Sister City Friendship Club, accepted an invitation to speak at the Emir Abdelkader Foundation Human Rights Seminar at the Council of Nation (equivalent to the U.S. Senate) in Algiers. The original invitation was for two days to participate in the seminar. After I expressed interest in visiting our Sister City Mascara and setting up lines of communication and networking between our communities and countries, the invitation was extended for me and my husband for one week (May 22–30, 2008). We feel deeply honored and extremely privileged to have had this opportunity and plan to share all that we learned with all who care to listen.

As guests of the Algerian government, we were graciously hosted by the Council of Nation (equivalent to the U.S. Senate) and the Emir Abdelkader Foundation. Our home base was the Hilton Alger by the Mediterranean in Algiers and while in our Sister City of Mascara we were guests at the home of Mascara Governor Merzoug. Protocol is strong; therefore, we traveled with police escorts in motorcades where ever we went.

Traveling in a country where the main language is not English, generally would present a problem; however, we were extremely blessed to be surrounded by many dedicated professionals who helped us to understand as much as possible about Algeria and its people. Many weeks of preparation went into our itinerary and the Council of Nation is to be commended for their outstanding planning abilities, flexibility and attention to details. It is because of these marvelous people as well as those who served us at all levels throughout our visit that we were able to leave the country knowing we'd return in a heartbeat because we were among friends. Kindness, smiles and humor cross all language barriers...we had a great time! We hope the Algerians enjoyed our visit as much as we enjoyed being with them.

Algeria is an amazing country from its astounding natural beauty to the charm of its inhabitants. We learned so much about Emir Abdelkader and admire how revered he is by Algeria. Because of his many admirable traits it is easy to understand why Algeria is such a peaceful and caring Arab nation. *Background on Emir Abdelkader & how Elkader got its name:* Emir Abdelkader had become well-known throughout the world, in the mid-1800s, for his bravery in leading Algeria's fight against France, who had invaded their country. Known as a great humanitarian, Abdelkader was also a poet, statesman, great orator, natural leader and a man of deep faith. His values and personal character seemed appropriate ideals for Elkader's founders as they formed a new community in a young country that shared those values. In 1846, Timothy Davis had heard about Emir Abdelkader and decided to name the new community "Elkader".

Ben Benhoua, an American History professor at the University in Algiers and a member of the Emir Abdelkader Foundation, has recognized the importance of our relationship with Algeria and has been instrumental in keeping our Sister City story alive. Ben has written and published many articles in Algiers regarding the Elkader/Mascara connection and has visited Elkader several times.

The prestigious Council of Nation (equivalent to the U.S. Senate)/Emir Abdelkader Foundation Seminar entitled: "Emir Abdelkader and the Human Rights, Concepts of Yesterday and Today" was held Saturday & Sunday, May 24–25, 2008. (It is interesting to note that their weekend is Thursday & Friday.) This highly charged seminar was held in the Council of Nation, a beautiful French colonial structure in Algiers. Attendees included high government officials and diplomats, distinguished business and educational leaders, magistrates, students, etc. This is an event that is highly respected throughout the world.

The session facilitators were: M. Boudjemaa Souillah, President of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and the Algerian Community Abroad Committee; M. Zohra Drif-Bitat, Vice-President of the Council of Nation; Mr. Abdelkader Bensalah, President of the Council of Nation; M. M'hamed Berredouane; and M. Messaoud Chihoub, Deputy President of the People's National Assembly.

Presenters included: Dr. Boualem Bessaih, President of the Constitutional Council, "Damascus and Lebanon Hills Events"; Idriss Jazairi, Algerian Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, "Emir Abdelkader and the Human Rights"; Professor Clovis Maksoud, Professor of International Relations and Director of the Center for the Global South at American University in Washington, DC, "LEmir Abd El Kader, Preliminary step in the contemporary Arab nationalist thinking"; His Eminence Tessier, Archbishop of Algiers, "Religion Identity and Tolerance"; Professor Paolo Urizzi, Manager of Perennial Verba Onlus - Italy, "Emir Abdelkader and the Religious Pluralism"; M. Abdeljelil Temimi, President of the Temimi Foundation for Scientific Research & Information; "Emir Abd Elkader facing the problematic closeness of people, religions and civilizations"; Omar Sadallah, Professor of Public Law, "Emir Abdelkader and the International Humanitarian Right Birth"; Pr. Bouzid Lazhari, Member of the Council of Nation, "International Humanitarian Right and Human Rights"; Professor Mohamed Bahloul, University of Oran, "The Transition From Authenticity to Modernity"; M. Salah Benkobbli, former Ambassador, "The Emir's Diplomatic Relations With the West"; Professor John King, "Emir Abdelkader in the United Kingdom"; Professor Zouzou Abelhamid, former member of the Council of Nation, "The Daily Life in Mascara Through Reports of the First French Consul"; M. Mohamed Boutaled, President of the Emir Abdelkader Foundation "The major episodes in the life of Abd Elkader"; M. Cherif Mustapha, former Minister and Ambassador, "Lessons and future perspectives"; and Kathy Garms, President of the Elkader Sister City Friendship Club, "Why Abd-Elkader in America".

As one of 15 presenters, I was the only American and the only woman. I spoke from my heart and represented Elkader (and America) to the best of my ability. The topic given to me by the Council of Nation was "Why El-kader in America"; therefore, my presentation included the history and naming of Elkader, how the Sister Cities relationship came about and the positive outcomes that have resulted from this connection with Algeria. The final part of my presentation stressed the need for people of all nations to "want to learn" about each other through communication, friendships and exchanges to truly understand each other and work toward common goals. My passion is peace and I am a life-long learner who wants to share everything that I have learned while visiting the marvelous country of Algeria.

One of the seminar presenters, Idriss Jazairi, currently Algerian Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, is a dear friend of Elkader. He has visited our community many times in different positions...as Algerian Ambassador to the United States, as President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, a division of the United Nations, and as Elkader's friend. Mr. Jazairi, originally from Mascara, has been extremely instrumental in sustaining our Sister City relationship with Mascara and Algeria, in general. My husband and I were extremely fortunate to be able to spend time with Mr. Jazairi while in Algiers.

The Seminar presentations were given in French or Arabic and headsets for translations were available to anyone who wanted them. My presentation was in English so most people used headsets, of course. I was told that even though many can understand English, they prefer to use headsets for more accurate interpretations or to reinforce what they heard.

As presenters, we would gather together in the gold room then be ushered to the session chamber. For lunch, we ate together in the Council of Nation dining room where the meals were delicious. The informal discussions were delightful even through interpreters. Everyone was wonderful and willing to share and discuss most anything. My husband and I felt we were among friends immediately!

This Human Rights Seminar reinforced the fact for me that Algeria is a peaceful and generous country moving forward in a positive direction. With the firm foundation of Emir Abdelkader at their roots, world peace is foremost on their minds and in their actions.

On Sunday morning, the second day of the seminar, all participants gathered at the grave site of Emir Abdelkader for the annual remembrance and memorial to their hero and leader whose firm and right ethics and values continue as the foundation of Algeria today. As the group gathered for the ceremony, my husband and I were honored to meet U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford, who is an amazing man and revered by the Algerians.

Monday, while touring a museum, our interpreter received a call that we were to meet with Mr.

Abdelkader Bensalah, President of the Council of Nation (equivalent to the Chairman of the U.S. Senate). It was a delightful visit and we shared our intent to facilitate communications between our communities and countries. He supported, appreciated and encouraged us to move forward with our project and asked how he could help. Chairman Bensalah is an extremely hospitable, kind and generous man who continually strives to support world peace in a proactive way.

Later on Monday, we met with U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford at the new U.S. Embassy which opened May 2008. It is an extremely large and secure complex which houses hundreds of people. Ambassador Ford is highly respected as a friend and diplomat in Algeria for his outstanding knowledge of the Arab world and for being a person of good judgment. As we explained our mission to continue our Sister City program with Mascara, he fully embraced our networking and sharing project. How honored we were to be able to spend time with him and hear his thoughts. His schedule is more-than-busy since, within the month, Ambassador Ford will be re-assigned to Iraq. The Algerians have an extremely high regard for Ambassador Ford and don't want to lose him; however, they so much want world peace that they know it is important for him to accept his new assignment in Iraq.

During our stay in Algeria, our goal was to continue to strengthen our common bonds in mutual respect, understanding and sharing. Working through challenges and issues together in positive, friendly and peaceful ways, results in enhanced relationships promoting honesty and trust. We were able to set up a workable network for communicating and sharing between Mascara and Elkader with the hope of facilitating future exchanges between our countries.

*Background on Our Sister City – Mascara, Algeria:* In 1984, the Sister Cities International Program brought two communities (Elkader & Mascara) and two countries (U.S. & Algeria) together. Our Sister Cities quest has been to "Promote peace through mutual respect, understanding, & cooperation – one individual, one community at a time." (Sister Cities International quote) Today, we continue in the same positive direction to share and to learn with our Algerian friends and others across the globe.

We found the town of M to be delightful where we met many wonderful people and toured interesting and historic sites. I found the pace to be rather soothing with daily life being so different from Algiers. The Mascara Cultural Advisor and our Mascara interpreters were extremely helpful in bringing the past to life for us. Being guests at Governor Merzoug's home introduced us to more local traditions and fascinating people. Around 20 guests joined us for dinner and we had interesting discussions, questions and exchanges of information through our interpreter. It is my true desire to connect these people with citizens of our area. Governor Merzoug also expressed interest in staying in touch with Elkader with the hope of one day visiting us.

Our Mascara friends welcomed us into their lives and were so pleased to share their museums, historic venues, traditions, life styles and culture. Most of the history is based around Emir Abdelkader's life. He is very much revered and respected and actually is a foundation for the country of Algeria. We visited important landmarks including the place where Abdelkader grew up and was educated. Other well preserved buildings gave glimpses from the past to when the Emir was leading his country against the invading French. His beautiful red hooded cape was amazing to see.

We were treated to Fantasia which included horse races and were taken to the 250 year old tree, which was the site where the 15 warring tribes gathered together to pledge allegiance to Abdelkader to follow his leadership against the French. A beautiful building was built to honor this event with tile pictorials telling the stories of Abdelkader. The Smala provided a glimpse as to how the temporary tent villages functioned years ago surrounded by a solid wall. We were introduced to delightful Arabian tent meals where we sat on carpets at low tables. The hospitality was amazing and truly heart-warming. Many delicious foods were served including huge bowls of couscous with gravy poured over the top and we all ate from the same bowl with giant spoons.

We enjoyed the children at all of our stops and we were pleased to see that they were having a good time. Beautiful little girls presented us with flowers, some children practiced speaking English and others simply enjoyed being around the "Americans" and eagerly posed for pictures with us. The adult hospitality was grand and genuine as they welcomed us with milk and dates on branches as a break mid-morning or afternoon. Beverages of hot tea, juice, and water were offered often, as well.

We toured many historical sites and met marvelous people throughout our journey. In Algiers, we viewed striking museums, the preserved Kasbahs, the new Cultural Center overlooking Algiers with its beautiful bay and many other unique venues. Outside Algiers, we toured Tipasa with its Roman ruins, a World Heritage Site since 1984, which dates back 2,000 years.

We attended special meals in lovely locations including Hotel El-Djazair where Eisenhower lived for a year during WW II. The hotel still showcases Eisenhower's bedroom and the room where the D-Day Invasion was planned. Foods were healthy and delicious. Fish and lamb were popular along with fresh vegetables, large bowls of fresh fruits, dates on branches, cheeses and breads.

As we traveled throughout Algeria, the Algerian's were amazed that there was a small town in the middle of America named "Elkader" and even more amazed that we have an Algerian/American restaurant, Schera's. One of the owners, Frederque Boudouani, is French-Algerian, the son of a former Algerian diplomat and has lived in Algeria. Frederique is active in our Sister City program and has guided us in preparing for Elkader's July 5<sup>th</sup> United States/Algerian Celebration honoring both country's Independence Days, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Emir Abdelkader and embracing peace between all people of the world.

Leaving Algeria on May 30<sup>th</sup>, my husband and I reminisced about all that we had experienced and vowed to work as hard networking in Elkader and America as we did in Algeria. That way, everyone can be exposed to a whole new world and have their eyes opened to all the possibilities beyond their own backyard.

As I stated in my presentation at the seminar: "And just think...all this began and has grown to such a position of impact because in the mid-1800s, Timothy Davis on one side of the world recognized the greatness and goodness of Algeria's own Emir Abdelkader on the other side. Now, that is a great international story!

Kathy Garms, President  
Elkader Sister Cities Friendship Club