JUF’s King David Society’s Mission to Morocco

This spring, 21 members of JUF’s King David Society (KDS), embarked on a once-in-a lifetime mission to Morocco along with 54 KDS members from 16 Federations across the country. KDS members generously support our community with a minimum gift of $25,000 to the JUF Annual Campaign. From Fez, to Rabat, Casablanca and Marrakech, we were enchanted by Morocco’s colorful architecture and rich history, and moved by the warm reception we received.

The country is ablaze with color: blue walls, colorful mosaic tiles and narrow cobblestone streets bustling with commerce. Donkeys, snake charmers and the aroma of spices and mint tea were all part of the Morocco we experienced. Each city was uniquely captivating, from the medieval aura of Old Fez where residents live as if it were hundreds of years ago, to the cosmopolitan capital city of Rabat with its contemporary restaurants and towering buildings.

We were privileged to travel with Marilyn Diamond, Honorary Consul General for Morocco in Chicago, a true scholar of its history, culture, economic and political landscape. Through her official capacity we gained extraordinary access to key government and business leaders, including a reception at Villa Mirador, the residence of US Consul General, Brian Shukan and his wife Clare. We were joined by Dwight L. Bush Sr., Ambassador of the United States to the Kingdom of Morocco, and were mesmerized by an unforgettable private recital by renowned pianist, Marouan Benabdallah.

We met with an impressive list of dignitaries and saw many historical sites, but our primary purpose was to gain an understanding of Morocco’s unique character where Arab, Muslim and Jews live openly and respectfully alongside one another, and to learn how our Federation dollars are used to care for our Jewish Moroccan brothers and sisters in need. This is at the heart of what makes JUF Missions so special. Dr. Steven Nasatir, President of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago and a Morocco Mission participant, summed up our roles this way: "When you participate on a JUF Mission to a country that has geopolitical significance for Israel and the Jewish People, you become a mini-ambassador for the Jewish People. That certainly was the case on this mission to Morocco and all who participated played that role with intelligence and commitment."

Participant, Linda Schottenstein Fisher, remarked, “I have so many memories but chief among them is the juxtaposition of the Jewish Day School where the kids were singing Hebrew at the top of their lungs and wearing kippot, smack dab in the middle of an Muslim country.”

Dana Hirt noted, “A JUF Mission is one of the most interesting ways to see the world. I came away with a deep appreciation for the culture of the country, a clear understanding of the history of the Jews in the region, an awareness of the
challenges and opportunities facing the region, and some wonderful new friends.” Fellow travelers Laure and Todd Lustbader and Shari and Mark Slavin echoed Dana’s observations about their new awareness of the importance of our work abroad.

Support for the Jewish community and the promotion of tolerance and mutual respect is a primary objective of His Majesty, King Mohammed VI, a strong and committed friend to Morocco’s 4,500 Jews, whose allegiance dates back to his grandfather, King Mohammed V. Marilyn and Michael Vender, Chicago Mission Co-Chairs, recalled that King Mohammed V refused a request by the pro-Nazi Vichy France regime to round up the country’s Jews for deportation. When asked to provide a list of all the Jews living in Morocco, the King replied, “I don’t have any Jews here, I only have Moroccans.” That act of defiance saved countless lives, and the future generations of those Moroccan Jews now number over a million throughout Israel and Europe.

Our jet lag is almost gone, but because of the extraordinary experience we shared and the close friendships we forged, the memories of this mission will last a lifetime.

To find out more about JUF Missions and VIP travel, contact Naomi Fox, Director of Missions at 312-357-4929 or NaomiFox@juf.org.

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