A Different Life
The Work of Education For All

Second Edition 2015
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 5

CHAPTER 1 • A Message from His Excellency Clive Alderton, Her Britanic Majesty’s Ambassador to Morocco .......... 9

CHAPTER 2 • A Different Life – The Work of Education For All ........................................... 13

CHAPTER 3 • Beyond Four Walls ................................................................................. 27

CHAPTER 4 • Seven Years On ....................................................................................... 33

CHAPTER 5 • Best Wheel Forward – the Marrakech Atlas Etape ................................. 45
It’s just turned four-thirty on a cool morning in early June in Asni, a village in the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains. Around me a group of chattering young girls between the ages of eleven and sixteen are laying out baskets and plates of bread and biscuits, jugs of mint tea, milk and orange juice, bowls of honey and marmalade for breakfast. Some are still in their pyjamas while others are fully dressed for the day, but all of them are boisterous and bubbling over with excitement.

In the kitchen, Latifa Aliza and cook Latifa Maatalla are busy packing hampers, tins and bags with everything they need to feed a crowd of hungry young girls on a long day out; blankets for sitting on are piled by the door, glasses and cups are carefully placed in boxes.

As the clock drifts past five, a kafuffle at the door, as another crowd of excitement surges in, the girls kissing and hugging the friends they haven’t seen for weeks. The clamour reaches fever pitch as Latifa shooshes everyone out the door, making sure nobody leaves empty-handed. A final check to make sure nothing and no-one has been left behind, and she locks the door, and, with her colleagues Khadija Oukattouk and Mina Hadod, makes sure that everything is loaded safely onto the two buses standing outside, their engines ticking over to take the chill off the morning.

As dawn warms the darkened silhouettes of the buildings into the rich salmon pink of the High Atlas landscape we roll; sixty-five girls, three housemothers, four cooks and helpers and me, as we set out on an Education For All adventure to the beautiful Cascades de Ouzoud. For some of the girls the four-hour ride will be the first time they have set foot outside the High Atlas; for others it is another trip to discover their beautiful homeland. For everyone it will be a glorious day out, full of laughter, singing, chanting, dancing, drum-bashing and food – and I’m immensely proud to have been invited to share such a splendid day, and which I can say with hand on heart, has been one of my happiest experiences in Morocco.
Two years on

THAT TRIP TO THE CASCADES DE OUZOU in July of 2012 was my first experience of the exuberant young ladies of Education For All – one not easily forgotten! Each time I return to Morocco I try to catch up with their news, and I’m always amazed and delighted to see how so many of them who came from nowhere are now confident young women with great plans for the future.

I was tremendously happy to be asked to update their story and the story of Education For All. I can only hope I’ll be here for the next update, when the first timorous little girls who knocked on the boarding house door in Asni are presented with their university degrees, the culmination of almost a decade of education and experiences that has turned their world around.

Derek Workman
Valencia, Spain
December, 2014
That great icon of this African Continent, Nelson Mandela, said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Well, Britons are known as very pragmatic, and when I took up this job I was really touched by the fact that young Berber girls, exactly the same as my young daughter would dream as big and as wise as the rest of us, but without education they would never be able to realise their full potential.

They say that British Ambassadors can do many things, but it was clear to me at the outset that I was never, of course, going to be able to build a school on every mountain peak. I did, however, come across a charity, a British charity, with the brilliantly simple idea that if the schools couldn’t come to the girls, perhaps remote geography could be defeated and the girls could go to the schools. So, taking the centuries old model of British secondary education, the charity built a boarding house at the foot of a mountain near an existing school which can gather together these small clusters of girls from all these remote communities.

The more I looked into it the more I appreciated the enormity of the challenges which had been overcome. There was building the house itself, no small feat, but the biggest challenge in this community was persuading traditional families, often themselves with little or no formal education, and who quite rightly have very strict views on the protection of the morality of their daughters, to allow these daughters to live away from home at a young age from Monday to Friday. But overcome these challenges the
charity did. However, the number of girls involved remained very small, a tiny drop in the ocean compared to the immense scale of the need outside Morocco’s cities.

So, I thought, here’s an opportunity for the Embassy and me to help, albeit in a small way. Not to be fazed by the impossibility of building schools for small clusters of children in remote communities but to see how the pull of my position could influence others in this simple but powerful model. I wasn’t the maker of the idea but I thought perhaps I could be its multiplier while managing my own daily tsunami of emails and not letting that be an excuse for inaction.

The result, I’m really happy to say, was the first seven girls from the remote mountain communities from near Asni ever to study for the baccalaureate took their exams this summer. My wife, Catriona, and I organised a big event at our residence in Rabat because we wanted first of all to congratulate the girls on sustaining their studies, no mean feat, since, as Aristotle so aptly observed, “The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet.” We also wanted to applaud the girls’ families, their courage and foresight, in taking that really brave step of entrusting their daughters to the project. I remember
one of the mothers, with incredible power and emotion and the intensity of the fear of losing her daughter to this completely unknown world of learning, but then, a few years later, her greater pride in the confident girl now standing next to her. And here was where we could add value.

We really wanted to show government, civil society and the media the simplicity of this model and to push it to encourage its replication the length and breadth of Morocco. It proved not to be a hard sell. King Mohammed the sixth is determined to tackle gaps in national education, and he has made the protection of women and family rights a leit motif of his reign. Pictures of the girls at our event in Rabat, dressed in their wonderful ceremonial dgelabas, made the front pages of the national newspapers, national television and radio news, and they even caught the eye of our British foreign minister who tweeted back. We’re encouraging a film crew who wants to make a documentary about the project.

So, in conclusion, let me just say that working with the grain in this way, we hope to capture the country’s imagination, as I hope the story will capture yours. Even in our busy lives, if we can’t make a change from scratch, let’s all just take a moment away from those in-boxes to see if we can multiply them.

Thank you very much.

(From a speech given at TEDx, Marrakech, Morocco, September 2013.)
CHAPTER 2

A DIFFERENT LIFE

THE WORK OF EDUCATION FOR ALL

_Educate a boy and you educate the man;_  
educate a girl and you educate  
a family, a community, a nation.

To most of us, access to an education beyond primary school never even enters into our consideration; it is simply there, almost by divine right. But what if it weren’t? And almost worse still, what if it is on offer but you can’t get to it because you live too far from the nearest school or your family is too poor to pay even the basic accommodation costs.

Think of yourself as the father of a young girl not yet even into her teens, and a group of foreigners come along to tell you that you should send her to a private boarding-house miles from home. “It’s for her benefit,” they say, but you possibly aren’t too well educated yourself, and the idea of putting your daughter into the hands of foreigners who aren’t part of your culture or religious beliefs might be something you are very wary of. Wouldn’t you rather take the counsel of someone of your own faith, a father himself and, even if not a direct friend, someone who has earned the respect of those who know him well?

Hajj Maurice, a small man with a large moustache and a winning smile, is well known and highly respected throughout the villages of the High Atlas Mountains, not just because he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, which entitles him to the honorific ‘Hajj’, but for the work he has done as a mainstay of the Association Bassins d’Imlil, a non-profit organisation that provides immense support to the people of the local villages, and has undertaken a range of projects that have created an enormous beneficial impact in the Imlil Valley. As the father of two daughters he was aware of the importance of education for young women, especially following the
sad loss of his eldest, who died of leukaemia while in her early twenties.

For weeks Hajj Maurice walked the mountains, talking to fathers and families, trying to convince them that allowing their daughters to live in the protective environment of a privately run boarding house while continuing their education was not only the best thing for them as individuals, but also for their families, their future children and their communities. Some families accepted with alacrity; the only thing that had stopped them doing it in the first place was that they simply had no money. But others were less convinced, and despite all his wiles and arguments, Hajj Maurice sometimes had to leave without even the concession of “we’ll think about it.”

Now put yourself in the place of an eleven year-old girl, eager for new sights, friends and experiences, despite never having been outside the confines of your village. You speak only Berber, a language so different from the national language of Arabic in both its spoken and written form that you may as well be going to another country to study, not a village thirty kilometres away, because Arabic is the language all your classes will be in. And then imagine that for the first time in your life you will have your own bed to sleep in, your own cupboard to put your clothes in and a washing machine to wash them – no more going down to the river to pound them on rocks. The boarding house might seem like a palace, but your new life still takes some getting used to!

**In the beginning...**

TAKE A GROUP OF FRIENDS who like a good meal out, blend in the feeling that they would like to do something to benefit the people of their adopted country – in this case Morocco – season with a bit of inventiveness and see what you get. Education For All.

Mike McHugo has more than thirty years experience of bringing school groups to Morocco, and was one of the forward-thinking gastronomes.

“We’d all lived in Morocco for a number of years and ate out together regularly. Most of us worked in tourism so we came up with the idea that we would go to a restaurant and get them to provide us with a meal at cost and we would promote them. We then charged ourselves the full rate and
paid the balance into a fund, which we would use to support something, although at the time we weren’t sure what.”

Over a couple of years the account grew, but it was through a chance meeting with John Woods, who had created the charity Room To Read to build libraries in parts of the world where children might never get the chance to see the written word, that saw them focus on education.

“Originally we thought that we might just act as fund-raisers for Room To Read,” says Mike, “but then we decided we’d like to do something specific to Morocco. It was quite obvious that girls didn’t have the same educational opportunity as boys, and in addition to that, some of the villages in the High Atlas Mountains are very remote and aren’t accessible by road. Children had to walk for hours to even get to the road-head before they might be able to hitch a ride to school.”

**Homes, not just houses**

GOVERNMENT BOARDING HOUSES have existed for children from outlying districts for many years, but these have to be paid for, and many families in remote villages are simply too poor to pay the fees. Unfortunately, these state boarding houses are often rather Dickensian, and many parents would never consider sending their daughters to one. The result is a distressingly high percentage of illiteracy among women in rural areas, said to be as much as eighty percent in some places.

“We realised from the beginning that we had to be very careful with our approach, once we had decided what we wanted to do,” says Maryk Stroonsnijder, who, with her husband Cees van den Berg, EFA’s Treasurer, own Riads Siwan and Azzar in Marrakech, and have been part of Education For All from the beginning. “We couldn’t suddenly start trying to educate children, especially girls, in a staunchly Islamic society, but what we could do was make it easier for some girls to continue their studies within the established school system.”

The proposal was that Education For All would provide for the needs of a number of young girls from the poorest families from some of the remotest villages in the High Atlas for the three years it would take them
to complete their secondary education. An apparently modest undertaking, but one that would affect the lives of an initial group of twelve girls, increasing by the same number each year, in ways that couldn’t have been imagined at the time.

In 2006 Education For All was officially recognised as a Moroccan NGO, with a sister charity set up in the UK, and began to raise funds in earnest for their first boarding house in Asni, forty-five kilometres from Marrakech. This house, and those that were to follow, are all within a couple of minutes walk from school, and take into account an anomaly of the Moroccan way of educational life for girls.

Many boys will cycle to school and take lunch with them. Sometimes a single class will be held in the morning and then another in the afternoon. Boys will simply stay at the school, but it’s considered unsafe for girls to do that, so they are expected to return home, impossible if they live far away. Often they’ve walked considerable distances to get to school, and on occasions when timetabling is particularly erratic they’ll miss a day’s schooling completely. For the girls at the EFA houses they can simply walk across the road.

Ideas are cheap, boarding houses aren’t, but after a lot of work
and hectic fund-raising, September 2007 saw the first twelve girls from remote mountain villages begin their education in Asni, living in rented accommodation until their purpose-built home was finished.

**Going places**

AS MARYK HAS BEEN HEARD to comment, “Sometimes when you start something you have no idea where it’s going to go.” – and before they knew it, EFA were a further fifty kilometres into the mountains, converting two apartments in the centre of Talaat-n-Yacoub into another boarding house, Dar Tinmel. Another twelve mouths to feed and energetic girls to look after, on top of the twenty by then living at Dar Asni.

“When we opened Dar Asni it was with the idea that we would take in twelve girls a year for the three-year cycle it took them to complete their studies to take them on to the lycée,” says Cees. “To be honest, we needed the experience of the first year to see how the house would work, so we could adapt our plans for the next one.”

One of the most important things about Education or All is that a very high percentage of the income and donations comes from people who have visited the houses and seen that they work. No-one involved in the
administration takes a fee or charges expenses. In Morocco, apart from the wages paid to the house mothers and staff, and the running costs for each house, the only charges made are bank charges – and there is almost no way in the world of avoiding those!

It’s because of this confidence in a job well done that the house at Ouirgane came into being. When a regular benefactor sold his business and wanted to help in a major way, he asked Education For All how much it would cost to build and fit out a house from scratch. One hundred thousand euros was the answer, with the land being donated by the local authority. On 5 May 2011 Dar Ouirgane had its official opening party, thanks to the generosity of someone who had the confidence in EFA to know that the money would go directly to those who needed it most.

This generosity is wonderful, but even with cash in the bank to build and equip a boarding house, nothing happens until a full year’s funds are in hand to cover the running costs of the initial intake. It would be devastating if the girls had to return to their remote villages, barely having said goodbye to their friends and family, because there was no money in the coffers to feed them. Education For All is determined that that will never happen.

**More than just bricks and mortar**

HOUSES ARE IMPORTANT, but there are foundations other than those on which a building sits which are of equal importance.

“The absolute rock on which everything else stands is the house mother,” says Maryk, “and with Latifa Aliza, who was in at the very beginning of Dar Asni, when they were still living in rented accommodation while we waited for the house to be built, we found an absolute gem. She was one of only two educated girls from her village. She left home when she was six years old and, apart from going back for holidays, she was away for sixteen years. She has shown an incredible level of commitment, and it was through her that we found the other house mothers, Khadija Oukattouk and Mina Hadod, when we opened Dar Tinmel and Dar Ouirgane, and they are equally as caring and encouraging with the girls in their charge.”

While the house mothers are the bedrock of life at the boarding
houses, the volunteers who spend up to four months, and occasionally longer, helping the girls at the houses are crucial for the girls’ development. Maryk stresses that a stay isn’t just an easy ride or something to enhance their CV.

“The volunteers are here for the girls, not the other way around. It can be a bit difficult at first, mainly because of language differences, and particularly at the beginning of the school year when there are a lot of new girls and the house mothers have to plan timetables for each of the girls and the programme for the house.” And it’s this careful planning, centred around the girls’ education, that explains why eighty percent of the girls to arrive at the EFA boarding house in Asni passed their exams to take them on to study at the lycée.

Every single one of the girls living at Dar Asni, Dar Tinmel and Dar Ouirgane has an individual timetable of studies drawn up at the beginning of term to cover the time they are not studying at the college. It’s at these times that the volunteers come into their own, supporting the girls to learn English and French, some of the most popular classes. Each house has a specially equipped study room, complete with computers with internet connection, which the girls are encouraged to use to broaden their horizons.
I arrived at Dar Asni in October 2008, soon after the house opened. The first few days were awkward as the girls struggled to live with a foreigner and non-Muslim – and I struggled to communicate due to my poor French. My every move was carefully monitored – the girls were very curious about my showering habits (once a day!) and my dental hygiene (I often had an audience). I was equally curious about their habits – keen to take a trip to the hammam (bathhouse) with them and learn about their religious rituals.

Before long, we were laughing together and sharing our worlds. I had over 20 eager teachers of Islam, Arabic, Tashlehit (the local language), and Moroccan cooking and customs. I ran daily English lessons and taught the girls how to use the computers. Thanks to a care package from my mother, I ran a dental hygiene session, and I worked at raising awareness about healthy cooking. I would often be found demonstrating the ratio of sugar to tea or oil to soup – I’m lucky the girls and the house mother, Latifa, were so accepting of my quirks.

Latifa is one of the best friends I have ever had – she’s like a sister really. We had some tricky times at the beginning as we both challenged each other’s boundaries and balanced our life experiences. My favourite memory was our first trip to the souq. When I arrived in October, we would get a weekly delivery (by donkey) of fruit and vegetables from the souq. The selection was variable – one week we would get 10 potatoes, the next we would receive one. If we needed anything during the week, we would call upon local men to purchase things for us. Latifa did an amazing job of making the best of what she received, but with so many people to cook for we realised we needed a better system. Together, we hatched a plan. What if we created a menu, made a shopping list and went to the souq to buy what we needed?
The next Saturday, we set off to the souq with a detailed list and a purse full of Dirham. We were both a little nervous about the venture – would we have enough money? How would we get everything home? But the girls spurred us on. They were so excited! About ten minutes after arriving at the market, Latifa’s father came racing up to us. He had heard on the fast-acting grapevine she was at the souq with a piece of paper and money and he wanted to know what was going on. There was a flurry of activity – hand gestures galore and speedy Tashlehit – until Latifa explained. A liberal, open-minded and caring man, he puffed out his chest, told his friends that his daughter was in charge and then set about making arrangements for someone to store our purchases and then take them home for us.

When we had bought everything on the list, we had a small amount of money left over. Relief overcame both of us as we talked through the options for the savings. We made our way back to the house to find our groceries being delivered. After we put everything in its place, Latifa took it all in and then excitedly exclaimed, ‘I’m like Linda – I’m the man and the woman!’ We laughed over the linguistics of it, but the sentiment was there. This amazing woman felt empowered and in control – like she really could take on the world. We had some tough times ahead as Latifa broke down gender barriers with the local men, but they came to respect her independence. The girls’ families, too, grew to appreciate how safe their girls were in the hands of such a competent woman. During my time there, I realised that with a strong and determined woman like Latifa at the helm, the girls of EFA would be destined for greatness.
When ecology organisation Mountain Propre did their clean-up of Jbel Toubkal in May 2011, the girls of Education for all were keen to play their part. Unfortunately they were too young to take part in the official event, but that didn’t stop them donning their Education For All T-shirts to do their bit for the environment. They discussed their idea with Latifa Aliza (sister Latifa, as all the girls call her).

“The girls said they would like to start it, to clean our class, our school, Asni, Ouirgane, because they see the need to clean their life. People see them and say these girls they learn a lot. They explained to the people in the villages that you need to sort rubbish, that you don’t mix things, and it’s good things to show the people in the village. Because these girls now have education they explained why they were doing it, rubbish does bad things for the environment, we need to respect it.”

A bonus was that the villagers weren’t seeing a foreigner picking up litter, they were seeing their village girls doing it, and when someone asked them why they did it they had a good answer, a green answer. “We do this because it is our village; rubbish is bad for our animals and the children, but mainly because we’d like our village to be the best place in the area.”

“I’m very proud of them because they are our ambassadors for all of the villages,” says Latifa. “When we visit the villages we find the best girls in all of them are the girls who have been to EFA. You find our girls are different. They speak Berber, Arabic, French and English. I feel very, very happy because these are girls from Education For All.”

As far as Mike McHugo is concerned, the fact that the girls did it themselves is as important as the actual act of picking up litter.

“Once they begin to start doing things themselves that’s hugely
impressive, when they begin having the motivation, the confidence and the ideas. It was their idea. That’s the only way the clean-ups work, when people want to do it themselves.

Which would indicate that one of the aims of EFA, to enable the girls to become confident, capable, compassionate young women, seems to be working.

But not everything is directed at education. Education For All makes sure that as often as possible the girls will be off on a jaunt; to paddle in the sea and wiggle their toes in the sand at Essaouira; to take a ride on a raft made of oil drums at the Cascades de Ouzoud, and even a tree-planting in Marrakech ended with a picnic and games – yet another first in the young mountain girls’ catalogue of new experiences.

And their first sight of the sea?
“They were so excited when we arrived to the beach,” laughs Aliza. “They thought that the water is just in the river. They never think that the beach is something very big. They see it on television, but they think it’s another world, but now to find these things are here in Morocco is amazing for them. I started to talk to the girls about where we go. I show them photos on the internet. We let the girls know about the area we are
going to before we leave. Before, when we said we’ll go to the Cascades at Ouzoud, they said okay, but they didn’t have any idea where we were going or what they could do, but now I talk with the girls a week before and say we need to do this, to take these shoes, water. Now it’s more organised.”

While the adventures and excursions extend the girls' knowledge of their own country, equally importantly is the opportunity to learn about other cultures and countries from the international volunteers who arrive at the boarding house doors.

“I think this is so important, very, very important,” comments Latifa. “Why? Because the girls in this house they meet volunteers. They know what the world is. EFA gives them all the world in their houses. When one of the volunteers came for the first time, they explained to the girls where they came from, what they eat, their religion, things like this. The girls didn’t know about other countries. In the beginning they think all the people speak Arabic. But now they know that over all the world the religion is different, the language is different, the life is different. You can live in the United States, but the people from the north are very different from the people in the south. Now the girls know this.”

Karima’s Story

Karima Targaoui is Education For All’s longest serving volunteer, spending over a year with the girls before returning to her home in Vienne, near Lyon in France. She still works with EFA as the coordinator of volunteers.

“I began volunteering with EFA on November 2009. (It seems like it was yesterday!) When I arrived in Dar Asni I was surprised; the house is so pretty and the organisation directed by Latifa is really good. Everyone was so nice. A week later it was hard to leave them and go to Talaat-N’Yacoub. The first days were really hard. I was in
the middle of nowhere, the girls didn’t know each other yet, EFA wasn’t well-known by the locals so they were suspicious, and the house wasn’t started. I really felt like I couldn’t do it. But I began to build a relationship with the girls and I realized how much they needed somebody to help them. That motivates me to succeed. Then Khadija, the gorgeous house-mother arrived, and I felt immediately comfortable with her. Together we did a lot of work; first with the girls, who now feel like sisters and have changed in many ways; secondly in the house, which became really nice and warm; and finally with the community around Talat N’Yacoub, who know us, respect us, encourage us and help us with our project. And all this
with the help of the committee, of course, who is always present and helpful despite the distance. And I thank them for this and for the trust they gave me.

I’m really proud to be a part of this project when I see how the girls have evolved. They didn’t only improve their marks at school, they became more open-minded, independent and have a better understanding of life. They are conscious that education is the key to their individual and collective future. They are becoming real women, the women who will change Morocco.”
CHAPTER 4

SEVEN YEARS ON

Of the ten young girls who nervously snuggled up in their first ‘own bed’ seven years ago, seven went on to pass their baccalaureate, five of whom went on to university. They have become confident young women, aware that they have something to offer the world, even if that world should simply extend to the betterment of their own village. But when they finished their first three years with EFA they posed a quandary. How can you educate a girl and expand her horizons and then simply say goodbye when her three years are done? The answer is – you can’t. But neither can they stay at the boarding house, taking up beds that other young girls need. So there really is only one answer – you build another house for the girls from the three houses who are moving on to the lycée.

Until now the existing houses have been able to cater for those girls, but their number is growing, with more girls each year getting high grades and wanting to continue their education. In September 2013, in time for the beginning of the new academic year, a second house was rented in Asni, to accommodate the girls from Asni, Ouirgane and Talaat who had reached lycée age. But with greater success comes greater demand for the limited number of places Education For All can offer.

“Leaving aside the fact that the girls from the EFA boarding houses have an exam pass rate of over 90%, almost twice the national average,” says Maryk, “we are receiving far more applications for places than beds exist, in complete contrast to seven years ago, when Hajj Maurice had to almost beg for girls to be allowed to continue their studies by staying in one of the houses.”

You might imagine that the success rate of the girls from EFA might be the cause of envy and bad feeling from some of the schools in the area, but it’s totally the opposite.

“We are receiving so many applications now that we are having to
set quite strict criteria,” comments Latifa Aliza. “The directors and teachers of the schools are a wonderful help because they know which of the girls really do come from poor families, but also those who have good exam results and the academic will to study. That’s very important, because we can’t afford to offer someone a place who isn’t inclined to study. That could lose another young girl her chance in life.”

“Apart from building more houses probably the major change is that we’re getting better at the more needy and further away girls who have even less opportunity,” says Mike McHugo. “We got a lot of backing from the teachers, particularly in the outlying school in Talaat, where we’ve got a huge amount of support from the local community. Talaat, which is a very rural school, is a world apart compared to Asni now. Asni is obviously changing, as Marrakech grows Asni grows, it’s not in the back of beyond, whereas Talaat is, and I suppose that for the future we can see us doing more in Talaat because the need there is greater. We are dictated in certain areas to what the government does, where they build their colleges and lycees. That’s why the third house is at Asni, because that’s where the lyceé is.

But with success comes greater responsibility.

“The houses are almost full. By 2016 we will have 180 girls and we
need one thousand euros every year to look after each girl. I find that quite a challenge,” comments Cees van den Berg. “There’s quite a lot of pressure to get 180 thousand euros per year because the last thing you want to say to these girls is that we’ve run out of money, so sorry, off you go.”

Fortunately, Education For All ‘ticks the boxes’ for people looking for organisations to make donations to that work in EFA’s area of expertise – girls, education, empowerment, but the more houses and girls you have the more money you have to raise, and the bigger an issue it becomes.

“Lots of people don’t want to donate for running costs, they want to see something physical, which is fair enough, but you can’t have one without the other. The two have to go hand-in-hand. So you try to look for any events which might be repeated, whereby at least you know you have a certain amount of fixed income coming in, such as the Etape, which should be something that generates some sort of stable income every year. Those sort of things would be very helpful.

“We typically won’t build another house unless we’ve got the running costs for everything for a year. That’s our model, so if someone said why don’t you build another house because you’ve got money in the bank, we’d say that we need the operating costs for a year before we expand.
That seems to have worked up to now and we’ll continue with that model in the future.”

Sonia Omar has worked extensively with human rights charities, and is now a part-time fundraiser for Education For All UK. She believes two main factors are influential in the success of EFA’s fundraising efforts. “Obviously the success of the girls in their education, with an exam pass mark of 93% in 2014, shows that the organisation is working well and gives confidence to sponsors. Probably equally importantly, though, is that EFA has proven that they have been able to raise the funds needed not only to support the girls in the first house but also to expand and build more houses. This gives confidence to donors that it will continue. The relatively simple model EFA works with, we don’t open another house if we don’t have enough money to support the girls for at least one year, is an easy one for sponsors to understand and appreciate.”

Considering that the girls supported by Education For All come from backgrounds of often extreme poverty, Sonia comments on a curious anomaly in attracting funds from larger funding agencies. “Unlike many sub-Saharan countries, Morocco isn’t necessarily seen as a deep poverty country, which can make it challenging to get larger funds.
“A lot of our funding comes from individual supporters. We’re thinking ahead but staying practical, and have created a five-year flexible plan so that if people are interested in giving large donations we can offer them different options.” Eighty euros a month is a modest commitment, but it means a whole new life for a young girl.

And the growth goes on. A second lycée house (the fifth of the EFA houses) is being built in Asni, to be completed early in 2015. In the meantime, a house has been rented and fully equipped to accommodate the next group of girls who have completed their college education.

When the group of friends started Education For All seven years ago it’s highly unlikely that they thought that five of those shy young girls who walked through the door at Asni would move on to university, to study such diverse degrees as biology, French, Islamic Studies and Information Technology, an incredible fifty percent of the original intake. With the girls having worked so hard to get this far it would have been unfair for EFA to simply abandon them, and the decision was made to support the girls while they continue their university studies.

Khadija’s story

KHADIJA ID AHMED OU ALI was one of those first ten girls, so shy that she barely spoke to anyone for the first couple of weeks. Now, at nineteen, she is a confident young lady, totally fluent in English, Arabic and Berber (although she admits she’s a bit shaky in French), who has just completed her first year at Marrakech University.

“I arrived at Asni with my father and we didn’t know where the house was. We didn’t have our own Education For All house then, so we started asking people. We started knocking on doors for a long time and finally my sister Latifa heard us and opened the door. I was very scared. It was the first time I was going to another place to live without my family. But it was a great day for me, I felt like this
is really the beginning for me, the beginning of my real life. Okay, I knew that I’m going to study, but I didn’t think that I would go this far. I thought maybe I study for a while, for a year or two, then I maybe go home. I didn’t expect that all these great things would happen to me with Education For All.

“We started as ten girls. We were different, we were from different villages, but all the girls we were all there without our family, it was the first chance for us to live together, so we had to cooperate, we had to live together, we had to make our own family there. That’s why I consider sister Latifa and all the girls like my second family because they are always there for me, whenever I need something I know I will find them by my side. In my first year in high school my mother died. I felt a big change for me but when I come back to Asni all the girls were there for me, they were all the time around me, they took care of me until I say it’s okay again.

“If it wasn’t EFA that gave me the chance to work I couldn’t do anything. I had the place I felt safe, I felt everything I needed was there for me. I had the chance, the opportunity to work. EFA offered all that to me, that’s why I have the power and energy to study. Basically they gave us the time, just having the time for us and having the time to have this idea for EFA. I just couldn’t see all that and just do nothing.”

After four years of study Khadija was so convinced that she would go to university that she began preparing her family for her leaving well in advance.

“I always imagine the future, so I started telling my parents two years before I went to university that I would be going. I didn’t know if I was going to succeed or not, but again something inside me told me I’m going to complete my studies. The first year has been difficult, but now I’m imagining myself being a doctor or a teacher of biology.”
While the obvious focus of Education for All is the development of the girls in their care, the last seven years have been an enormous learning curve, as much for Latifa Aliza herself as for any of her ‘sisters’.

“At the beginning there were twelve girls. I did everything – cook for them, teach them – I did it alone. In the second year I did the same. Now I feel very comfortable, the committee members give me more confidence to be more responsible.

“It’s not just a good result for the girls, it’s a good result for me too. I grow too with these girls, I have more experience, more self-confidence. I learn a lot about the life and relationships.”

Seeing her charges develop on almost a daily basis has been enormously rewarding for Latifa, but it’s the unexpected moments that pluck the emotional strings. Each year the schools present certificates to the girls with the best marks, usually given by their teachers. In 2014 the EFA girls asked if Sister Latifa could present them.

“It was wonderful. I went five times and cried every time. These are very simple girls but it’s these small gestures that made us very happy.”

The girls currently at university in Marrakech regularly go back to the house in Asni and talk about university life, particularly how it might seem a target to aim for but it is hard work and there are other directions the girls can go. One of the current final year girls will be taking up a place on a training course in patisserie in nearby Tahanout, and a French computer software company has approached Education For All about sponsoring a trainee in information technology.

The reality is, though, that not all the girls will either want to go on to further studies or even be able to.

“We’ve got to be realistic,” says Mike. “There is a drop-out rate, that’s only to be expected, and thankfully it’s very small, but at least the girls will go back to their villages and be able to offer something, even if it extends no further that making sure their own children get an education. We’re looking at trying to provide some form of pre-school education in the villages, and this would be an ideal way for the girls to help their communities. Because surely that’s what education is all about. It’s not just
to make you a clever person, it’s to give you the skills and opportunity to help others.”

Hard work and high ideals can carry you far, but it is the words of those who have been helped to achieve a life beyond their dreams that might carry you further still, as Khadija expresses so eloquently.

“There’s something I really want to say; we thank everyone because there are a lot of people helping, some people we know their faces, some their names, some we have heard about and some we don’t know, so I really thank all of them. And I want to tell you that these girls haven’t been just girls, they have been a whole family. When I started from my village I was the only girl to complete their studies but now there’s six or eight girls completing their studies from my village. So there is a big change.

“So these people aren’t just helping the girl, they are helping the whole family, and by helping this family they are helping a whole community and this community is going to give for us another generation and more people educated because I truly believe the education is everything in life.
“Thank you everyone, whether they are near to us or far away, because they have to know that we are very thankful. We know there are a lot of people helping, we know they are working for us, we know they are happy for us, we know they are doing a great thing for us, so they really deserve a big thank you.”

And for the future?

“There are so many things that people want us to do, providing a place for boys and girls to go, where they can have something to eat and drink between hours which is a problem because the facilities aren’t there and the kids are on the street,” comments Cees, “but we are a volunteer organisation and only the staff at the houses are paid. I feel we should do what we are good at. We could get into a situation where I don’t think we could manage it all with the resources we have and the money that is needed to do it all. We have to always be aware of the money we need to raise just to keep the houses going, and it’s quite a challenge every year to make sure we have enough funds coming in for that year.

“The only way you can measure it is looking at the girls and seeing how successful you are, and if you have a pass rate at school at almost twice the national average then Education For All is extremely successful.
The riders assembled at the gates of the Circuit International Automobile Moulay El Hassan, Marrakech’s Grand Prix race track, the more powerful who might see the day as a trial as to how they would cope with the ‘Ouka Monster’, the steepest étape in the cycling calendar, and those who simply wanted an exhilarating ride under the blue Moroccan skies, with the bonus of raising funds to provide homes for girls from the poorest of Moroccan families so that they might continue their education and create a better future for themselves, their children, their families and their country.

For experienced riders the first thirty kilometres to the staging point at Ourika, (which for some reason is known as ‘Scorpion City) is a warm up, a chance to stretch the legs in preparation for the thirty-five kilometres to the summit, an unrelenting climb to 2,624 metres without flats and dips to ease the legs from the interminable turning of the pedals. For others it’s the turnaround point, and the slow, steady rise to 850 metres from the flat plains of Marrakech can feel equally as unrelenting, although with the comforting thought that once they’ve fed and watered at Scorpion City, it’s downhill almost all the way home.

In total contrast to the last étape, when the day began in chilling mists and stayed that way all day, other than for those who reached Oukaimeden, where the skies were bright and sun warmed their arms – briefly – 2014’s étape experienced more typical glorious weather, more the kind to spend the day lounging on the beach than pedalling. The constant to-ing and fro-ing of the backup vehicles, provided by co-sponsors, Argan Extreme Sports, dispensing water, bananas and the occasional puncture repair made sure that no-one suffered from the effects of the heat, and it was with a sense of pride that everyone who set out returned under their own steam.
Every event needs a character, and the Brompton that James Tuffs completed his second Atlas Étape on appears to be filling the role. It might seem a bit masochistic to tackle the Ouka Monster on a folding bike with wheels not much bigger than a large dinner plate (which probably means that James’ legs have to go around three times more than other cyclists’) but despite having said he wouldn’t be back at the end of the first year’s event he was there again at the starting gate. “The views are truly, truly stunning. I’ve actually seen it this time around, which is a bonus. It was fantastic, beautifully organised, great weather, but for us non-acclimatised people it was hard work. Nice sense of achievement now though.” And he still took time on the long ride into Marrakech to stop at the side of the road and phone his wife to assure her that yes dear, everything’s fine.

“I think it was excellent to see so many young riders this year because there were none last year,” says Mike McHugo, one of the organisers of the Etape. “These are the up-and-coming riders that will help put Morocco on the cycling map. It was great to see Chaouki, a sixteen-year-old Moroccan boy win the sixty kilometre leg, and the determination of three fourteen-year-olds to get to the top was remarkable. We also had a father-and-son team, Hamoud and Youssef El Foukai, who’s fifteen. Hamoud was a professional rider for Hamburg and he’s now coaching Youssef, who competes all over Morocco and could well become a professional rider himself.”

Probably more than any other event of its kind the Marrakech Atlas Etape stood out because of its inclusiveness. “That really impressed me,” says McHugo. “We had riders from their teens to their seventies, almost thirty per cent of whom were women. There were a lot of riders from the UK and other parts of Europe, but it was great to see the number of Moroccan riders taking part and communicating with the other riders in whatever way they could.”

Many of the riders were hugely complimentary about the friendliness of the event and of the Moroccan people they passed on the road; kids giving them a high-five, people encouraging them from cars and mopeds, which is simply indicative of the friendliness of the people of Morocco.
“We intend to keep it relatively small,” adds McHugo, “small enough to remain friendly, because it’s not easy to have a friendly event when there are thousands competing. Obviously the number of Moroccan people and people who have never cycled before taking part will grow, mainly the 60km ride, I think, with all sorts of people doing it.” And as he signed up for the 2015 étape he obviously left the painful memories behind.

And James Tuffs, stretched out on a Moroccan rug at the end of the event, a roll-up cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other, will he be back next year? “At the moment, no,” he says with a grin. “But I said that last year. It’s amazing how time heals the pain of it all.”

*The Marrakech Atlas Etape in support of Education For All takes place annually on the last Sunday in April. Come and join us. You can read the full version of the article on the www.marrakech-atlas-etape.com, where you can also register for the next event.*
Marrakech Atlas Etape, annual cyclosportif, last Sunday in April
We hope that this brief story has given you an insight into the important work of Education For All. But it’s an ongoing story. We are welcoming more girls each year and watching as others make their way into the wider community, perhaps to further their education, or to return to their villages to help improve the lot of the children of the future. You can keep up to date by visiting our web page www.efamorocco.org and registering for our regular newsletter.
To learn more about the Marrakech Atlas Etape visit
www.marrakech-atlas-etape.com