

International Spouses find development, inspiration in the Carlisle Experience

by Carol Kerr

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Robyn Prictor, spouse of Australian Col. Michael Prictor, an IF in the USAWC Class of 2012, and Hind Aissa, spouse of Moroccan Lt. Col. El Hassane Aissa, talk about the experience at Carlisle Barracks and the impacts it has had on their lives. photo by Thomas Zimmerman.

June 7, 2012 -- What a difference a year makes. For the International Spouses with the Army War College in Carlisle, the difference is overwhelming -- the lessons enduring.

Hind Aissa's overwhelming concern about a year in Carlisle was that her sons would lose a year of school at home in Morocco. As it turned out, their learning continued and so did hers. Her son in Middle School learned woodworking, sewing, cooking, and gave presentations in class about Morocco and France. She learned English, photography, and driving, and explored volunteerism.

"When I came here I thought that the only difference would be the language but I met a lot of new people and changed my opinion," said Aissa. "This is emotional for me now as all the Americans I've met ask me for my address. I want to keep these relationships for the rest of my life. This was the best year of my life."

"The beauty of relationships has gone beyond superficial. We have become familiar and care about each other," said Aissa, who accompanied her husband, Moroccan Lt. Col. El Hassane Aissa. "We are supported by Conversation and Culture and the Carlisle Barracks Spouses Club. "

"The beauty of the programs here is that we now know and care deeply about each other and we have grown this year as a result," said Robyn Prictor, spouse of Australian Col. Michael Prictor, an IF in the USAWC Class of 2012. "I know this was an emotional journey for many of us."

The path through their American year is guided and helped by the International Fellows Program office,

especially Beth Woods and the Conversation and Culture program. And, equally critical is the English as a Second Language program, offered downtown, for those who don't already speak English well.

C&C opens windows for international spouses. The monthly programs introduce American culture; encourages use of English; helps international spouses meet, find common interests, and the creates confidence to explore new ones.

"We're all women facing the same difficulties, here without family or friends. Conversation and Culture is specially designed for us to support and make sure we got the most out of the experience in the United States," said Prictor.

"So many dots connect us now," she said.

"I've worked in libraries all my life, mostly with women, but this experience is different," said Prictor.

"What I'll remember is the sincerity and love I've received from so many women.

"I think the War College facilitates this – and it's whatever Beth has in her magic ball," she said. Beth constructed the journey and then encourages us to make it ours, she added.

Prictor looked forward to the Army War College year as a change of pace from recent challenging years of her husband's deployment to Afghanistan and extended separations.

"This was an opportunity to support my husband, Michael's, studies and growth as an officer, and the pleasure of meeting practically the whole United Nations," she said, referring to the 66 nations represented by the International Fellows.

Aissa met Robyn Prictor at a Lancaster candy store during a bus tour. "It wasn't the visit that matters in the long run," Prictor said. "It was the interactions on the bus. It was those little moments that build friendships. It's all about little seeds."

They become friends through a range of new activities, each leading to another experience and another set of friends – like dominos.

"We were at a C&C program at the chapel, when we noted a quilter, Ann Allen," said Prictor, "I had learned quilting at Fort Bragg when my husband was a helicopter pilot with the 82nd." One question led to a helping hand and that led to a new group of about 12 quilters, from Bangladesh, Chili, the Czech Republic, among others. They polish English skills as they quilt.

The Carlisle Barracks Spouses Club introduced them to Lunch Club: a group of a dozen or so women who pair up to invite the rest to their homes for lunch, a full-course meal, and all the recipes. Lunch Club creates a virtual smorgasbord of entertaining and menu ideas – but it's not really about recipes, said Prictor.

"It's about the friendships," said Prictor. "It changes your heart. This year, I've watched so many women grow and do amazing things."

One of them was Prictor's own daughter who took language classes at Dickinson College as part of a special relationship; several adult women took Dickinson classes this year, enriching their American experience by exposure to a prominent example of U.S. college life and academics.

The lessons can surprise, said Aissa.

She'll remember the Army War College's spouse development program, Facilitating Leadership And Group Skills, or FLAGS, for helping her better understand herself and better recognize her ability to help others in learning languages. She has lived 20 years in France and enjoys a propensity for language; here she came to see her calling to help by tutoring French.

"Here, I learn to help people -- to volunteer," she said. "My son volunteers every week at the Farmer's Market."

"I am very different, now," said Aissa. Her family is surprised to hear of her new interest in cooking and in the traditional art of applying henna. "Being here surprised me," she said.

"I will cherish this forever," said Prictor. "I've never experienced anything like this before and probably never will again."

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