

About four weeks ago, I had a most wonderful dinner party with Yasmine (my roommate and CAPI intern), my Afghan students and their supervisor Jamal. I don't think I have mentioned this in previous posts, but one of my tasks here at MSRI is to facilitate English conversation classes once a week with a group of ten unaccompanied minors, all of whom are minority Hazara people from Afghanistan. Prior to this internship at MSRI, I had never heard of 'unaccompanied minor refugees', so I will just quickly define this term to clarify. An unaccompanied minor, according to Citizenship and Immigration Canada is "a child under the age of 18 who does not have their parents or legal guardian present at the time they make a refugee claim in Canada"<sup>1</sup>. As such, my students are registered refugees with the UNHCR, living here in Kuala Lumpur without any support or supervision from their parents or a legal guardian. There are many reasons for this; most of which are heart wrenching. Nonetheless, these youth are incredibly resilient and brave despite the separation from their families and being in a highly vulnerable position. I have a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for how they are managing their lives, their dedication to learning and education, as well as how they take care of each other.

In these last months, I have grown to be greatly attached to my students. Although I am technically their 'teacher', I feel more like an older sister – we have been spending quite a lot of time together participating in various fun activities from visiting the Islamic Art Gallery, to bowling, to visiting a theme park last week. As a result of developing a close relationship with them, I am starting to feel gloomy that I will be leaving Kuala Lumpur soon (3 weeks from today).



In class about 2 months ago

---

<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada (2013), 'Terms and Definitions Related to Refugee Protection, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/tools/refugees/definitions.asp>

Instead of the dinner party event, I was initially planning to organize an overnight trip to the Cameron Highlands with my students, but after performing a risk management assessment and talking to their supervisor from a partner organization that focuses on child protection (SUKA society - <http://www.sukasociety.org/>) we decided that the risk for detention was too great and that we should stay within the city limits. The students were definitely disappointed about this (as was I), but I think they were also pretty eager to have a dinner party at my house and go to the theme park instead. We decided that the students would make Bolani - a traditional Afghan dish. I made Spaghetti, which is one of the only things I can make that I won't mess up, and Yasmine made some delicious Falafel. The food was fantastic and we had an amazing time hanging out and cooking up a storm while sharing stories, dancing and listening to Afghan music. I even summoned up the courage to sing a few songs and play the ukulele which I have been learning for a few months. We played some cards too, and I learned an Afghan card game that is not unlike that card game 'Bridge' that my grandmother loves to play back in Canada.

This sharing and exchange of food, music, and stories got me thinking that although the ingredients in these things are beautifully diverse and unique, no matter where one comes from, gathering together with an open heart and having a food party is an occasion that everyone can relate to and enjoy. This gave me an idea for my Capstone project, as I would like to focus and learn more about the processes of refugee resettlement and the hurdles that displaced persons may face upon their arrival to a new country. I thought that maybe I could host a similar party when I get back home, and I began wondering if there were such events being held already in Victoria or Canada. I did a bit of research and found an organization in Australia called 'Joining the Dots' which runs a program called the 'Welcome Dinner Project'<sup>2</sup>. Basically, this 'Welcome Dinner' is a potluck at someone's home or community space whereby eight Australians and eight newcomers gather to share food and stories while fostering new connections and relationships. This organization's approach aims to "join the dots in ways which create deep shifts and systemic change, primarily shifting the disconnection that lies at the heart of so many social issues."<sup>3</sup> For my capstone project, I would like to emulate this project in Victoria. I would like to gather Canadians and refugees from my local Victoria community together to share some fantastic food, exchange stories and make new friends. I feel that this effort to celebrate the commonalities between people can be incredibly worthwhile to inspire meaningful change.

I suppose in a way, this dinner I had would be my first official 'Welcome Dinner', albeit in Malaysia where they are hoping to relocate from eventually. To end this blog, I would like to share some photos from the evening. Thank you for taking the time to read my post and I hope you enjoy the photos.

Ubuntu, Siobhan Davis

---

<sup>2</sup> Joining the Dots – The Welcome Dinner Project, <http://www.joiningthedots.org/the-welcome-dinner-project>

<sup>3</sup> Joining the Dots – Our Approach, <http://www.joiningthedots.org/about-us/our-approach>



Ready for Dinner, but Picture First!



Card Time! If you lose, you have to go under the blanket while the others poke you and you have to guess whose finger it was!



Many Hands Make Light Work



Bolani Making - These Kids are Top Chefs!



Dance Party