REFLECTIONS OF A PIONEER

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Recently, my husband and I, along with several other teaching, personnel and service staff, were honored by the U.A.E. University in recognition of our 15 years of service. I have been employed as an English teacher for the foundations program which was called at that time Basic University Education Center, B.U.E.C. for the past 15 years and my husband, Hassan has been Mr. Passepartout of the same program doing everything and anything until recently he was given the title of “Public Relations Officer.” This basically means, “he’s the “man” of the personnel department. Before the recognition ceremony, I was asked to speak about what it was like to be a “pioneer.” As I reflect back to that time, I remember I was a reluctant pioneer. When I first heard about the job, I had no idea where the U.A.E. was and from the stories I had heard stories about living in Saudi Arabia I knew that it was the last place on earth I wanted to be. However, all doors for employment had closed for me in Morocco so I halfheartedly gave my friend, Juliana Gaipo, my C.V. to take with her to the U.A.E. Tens days later, the Iraqis invaded Kuwait and I knew without a doubt the U.A.E. was the last place in the world I wanted to go. When I didn’t hear anything thing for several weeks, I forgot all about it. The birth of my third child did a lot to refocus my attention on other things. When I did actually get the call from my friend, she told they still needed teachers desperately and was I still willing to come. My husband was vigorously nodding his head up and down so I weakly agreed. But my heart wasn’t in it. I kept thinking I have children and an infant and there’s going to be a war over there! Not only that, but it took several weeks to process the visa. When I finally got the call, the secretary at the personnel department told me, Mrs. Rachidi we now have the visas for you and your husband and two children.” “What? I replied, I have three children!” Then she proceeded to say, “No, you don’t.” “Excuse, I said, I’m the mother, remember, I think I know how many children I have!” It turned out that photocopy of the passport for my 3 year old had been misplaced and only visas for my son, baby, husband and self had been
processed. So, minus one child and a backpack full of doubts and fears, we struck out in faith that God had indeed provided a place for us to live and work and He would protect my husband and I and our young children. Our 7 year old and 3 month old baby would accompany us while my 3 year old stayed behind with her grandmother and nanny for another week until her visa could be processed.

Although I had been living the Arab world (Morocco) for the past 4 almost 5 years, nothing had prepared me for the U.A.E. It was a land of strange customs; men who kissed each other face to face and women covered from head to foot in black. Everywhere I looked I saw contrast and stark landscapes; rolling hills of sand dunes in different colors from almost white to reddish orange and mountains totally void of vegetation. These images were also contrasted with the beginnings of modernization; beautifully landscaped gardens, wide streets lined with palm trees, electricity poles, telephone lines and street lights. You would occasionally see children of varying sizes barefoot in the streets and families driving around in a Nissan Patrol with 5 or 6 kids in the back seat. There were traditional souks and modern supermarkets. I remember vividly one morning waiting in the ladies line at the bank seeing a man with windblown hair, muddy sandals whose dishdasha was splattered with mud walk up to the cashier and pull out a wad of 500 dh bills so thick that he could barely get his fist around it. As I stood there gaping at the man, I thought how truly amazing it was that God would give incredible wealth to such unpretentious people.

Not only did I find the country and its customs strange, but when I got to the university and saw the program in which I was to teach I got another shock. Having taught previously only in elementary and high schools, I remember asking Karen Zeller who was the head of the program on a telephone interview, “I’ve never taught at the university level before, do you think I have the right experience?” She wisely answered, “Oh yes, I think you’ll do just fine.” When I started work, it became clear that we were literally starting out from scratch. There was a concept about how we were supposed to teach, a vague philosophy called “Focal Skills” that we enthusiastically tried to adapt. But it was as foreign to the students we were trying to teach as we were to them. The students had never been in an English-speaking environment before and they were as unsure how to act or what to expect as we were. The businessmen embraced us wholeheartedly and we had no problem getting credit at the shops in town. We spent our first two weeks in a hotel because rent was very difficult to find here in Al Ain. A lot of the apartments had been taken over by Kuwaitis escaping the invasion of their country. Finally we were given unfurnished apartments and spent hours looking for furnishing and appliances. All we had to say was that we were employed by the university and would pay as soon as we got our first check and the merchants let us buy a.c.’s, a refrigerator, washer, T.V. and furniture. But we furnished our apartment sparsely because there was always a chance that we would be evacuated at some point. Although the businessmen were happy to see us, the rest of the community was unsure about what these foreigners were going to teach their children so they passed this fear on to them. There were articles written in the newspaper, and Friday services in the mosques dedicated to criticizing this new program and protesting the invasion of these foreigners. We had a vision as we called it back then but not much else. There were no books, no materials, and no curriculum to follow. But we had a dedicated and passionate group of colleagues who put long hours and endless days and nights in planning and preparation. However, everything
we did was scrutinized by the local community. Then, many of the students failed the first exam and they rioted on the girls’ campus, throwing their notebooks into the fountain and breaking a window.

In January 1991, we had our first vacation. A lot of teachers fled the country as the first Gulf War threatened to erupt. But Lily Ford and I stayed and taught a three week research course that ended the day before the war started. Were we foolish or faithful to remain in a country not knowing what would happen? Like others we watched CNN daily to see the progress of the war. We stopped meeting together in public places that could be targets of attacks. When we met with people from the American Embassy they told us the greatest threat was the rumor mill that could wreak havoc and cause panic. When we weren’t thinking about work, we made escape plans. We always carried water in our car and a supply of candles in the house because we heard our water might be poisoned or electricity cut. There was a telephone tree that we used to call each other to warn us of the latest developments. I remember one night in particular, my husband got up to answer the phone at 3am. The caller informed us that the Iraqis were threatening Israel. My husband obviously disturbed by the phone call, answered, “Call us back when they get to Al Ain.”

When it was all over, they sold T-shirts, I survived the Gulf War. We bought one. We survived the Gulf War, the riots at the B.U.E.C. and the chaos. As I look back at 15 years since that incredible first year, I have to admit that God knew what he was doing by bringing us here. That step of faith we took 15 years ago was rewarded and we have been truly blessed by our experience. We are proud to be part of the best foundation program in the Gulf. As I look back over the past 15 years I have come to three conclusions. First, I love teaching. It’s what I was born to do. Second, I love the Emirati people. I have found no kinder or more generous people on the earth and finally, my identity has been altered. Although I was born and will remain Janet Lynn Sloan, daughter of James and Emmajane, I have taken on a new identify and tell everyone I meet I’m an “Ainaouia” or a member of the al Ain community. God has richly blessed the U.A.E. and we feel very fortunate to have been a part of that. I thank H.H. Sheikh Nayhan, the minister of higher education for having a vision, never wavering in this vision but mostly for allowing us to share it with him, for the strong leadership in H.H. Sheikh Zayed, God rest his soul, and Dr. Ali Sharhan, who was our director in 1990, without whose patience and perseverance, we would have never established a foundations program. Last but not least, I’m thankful for all the unforgettable colleagues I’ve worked with over the years and the great friendships that I have made since I’ve been here.