When I first arrived at my host family’s home in Morocco, I was exhausted, nervous, and wondering what I had gotten myself into. Suddenly, the idea of living with a family of strangers in a foreign country seemed enormously intimidating. I sat, back ramrod straight, perched on the very edge of the family’s living room sofa, gingerly taking bites of the cookie my host mom had ardently insisted that I take. I watched helplessly as crumbs fell from my mouth to the sofa, and I tried to surreptitiously brush them onto the floor before anyone noticed. After all, I wanted to make a good first impression, and it seemed to me that making a mess of cookie crumbs was not a good way to start.

Now, looking back on my first days with my host family and my intense apprehension that I would do something wrong, I have to laugh. It did not take long for me to feel comfortable in my host family’s house -- within a week, I had transitioned from sitting uncomfortably on the sofa’s edge to ungracefully sprawling out on it, watching Moroccan television and hoping that a cool breeze might blow in through the window. Honestly, throughout my two month study abroad, life with my host family quickly became one of the highlights of the experience. Talking with my host mom, playing with my host sisters and their cousins, visiting my host dad at his small shop, gathering around the table to break the Ramadan fast together -- these are the things that I will always remember from my study abroad. These small, daily, occurrences are what ended up defining my study abroad. It was these things, more than the endless hours I spent in language classrooms, more than weekends spent traveling with my fellow American students,
more than after class discussions with my teachers, that taught me what it really means to immerse oneself, as a student, in another culture.

I had thought that the most important part of my study abroad would be my classes -- after all, I was in Morocco to study the Arabic language. And although my classes were excellent and my Arabic improved exponentially, I discovered that they were not, in fact, the foci around which a study abroad experience revolves. When I think of my time in Morocco, I do not first think of sitting in an Arabic classroom; rather, I think of the strong bonds that I formed with Moroccans, including the members of my host family. And though I am majoring in Arabic and have now studied Arabic for a number of years, going to Morocco has made me appreciate it anew. I have always valued Arabic for its beauty, for the way that simple sentences can sound like poetry, and for its incredible diversity of dialects. But before being in Morocco, I had never truly valued it as a language, which at its most basic is simply a method of communication. Before my study abroad in Morocco, I had never had to rely solely on Arabic to communicate or form relationships. Everyone I was speaking Arabic with also spoke English, and there was always a sense that if I faltered in my linguistic ability, there was a safety net of English ready to catch me. When I arrived in Morocco, that safety net abruptly fell away.

Suddenly, falling back on English was not an option -- neither my host family nor my professors spoke English, and I was forced to communicate solely in Arabic or its Moroccan dialect. At first, I struggled. Speaking with my host mom and my host sisters was a challenge. There is nothing more discouraging than attempting to say something in Arabic and receiving, in response, a look of utter incomprehension. I became well acquainted with that look. Despite this, my host sisters soon became my Moroccan best friends, and I can honestly say that I came to
love them. And throughout this, I came to realize that it was okay if my Arabic wasn’t perfect, if I sometimes made mistakes or had to struggle to be understood, because my study of Arabic was the reason I was able to meet and make relationships with all of these people I would otherwise never have met and would not have been able to communicate with at all. And even with the mistakes, the relationships remain. When my host family burst into laughter when I accidentally pronounced the word for “heart” like the word for “dog,” or when my complete inability to roll my r’s became a running joke in the household, my relationship with my host family did not suffer. I learned, though this experience, that I did not have to wait until my Arabic was better to really use it. I can use it now, and in doing so can form real friendships with people I would otherwise have not been able to talk to at all.

My study abroad in Morocco fundamentally changed how I approach my study of the Arabic language, and it caused me to reaffirm my commitment to learning this language. I will always remember my interactions with my host family, and I value my Arabic language classes all the more for facilitating these interactions and these relationships. I realize that learning a language is not just about reading Arabic literature or appreciating Arabic poetry or marveling at the beauty of Arabic calligraphy -- learning a language is really about making connections with people. I’m sure that I could have lived with a Moroccan host family even if I knew no Arabic. In fact, I have friends who have done this. We could have communicated through body language and the broken French I vaguely remember from high school. I would not, however, have been able to have the same type of relationship that I ended up having with my host sisters. My twelve year old host sister would not have been able to confide in me about her problems with some of her classmates at school or about her dreams to someday study at a university in the United
States. My host mom would not have been able to tell me about her experiences as a young mother, about the fear she felt having her first child at eighteen and the joy that her children bring to her life now. It is these things, these conversations, that I truly value from my study abroad experience, and it is because I want to continue having these types of conversations that I want to continue my study of Arabic and one day return to the Arabic-speaking world.

In the two days preceding my departure from Morocco, my host mom cried at least three times. On the day of our departure, she and my host sisters came to see us off, and as the bus idled in a parking lot, I hugged them goodbye. My oldest host sister, the twelve year old, hugged me with tears in her eyes and then told me that she loved me and that she would see me when I returned to Morocco. As the bus pulled out of the parking lot, I looked back and saw my host family waving goodbye, and was struck by how sad I was to be leaving them. I had never imagined that my study abroad would allow me to form relationships like these, but I am glad it did. It was these relationships, and these emotions, that truly made my study abroad a rewarding and enriching experience.