



Bringing hope into Casablanca's slums

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By Martin Fletcher, NBC News Correspondent



CASABLANCA, Morocco – Casablanca, Morocco's largest city, conjures images of [Rick's Bar](#), couscous and the third largest mosque in the world, built at fabulous cost on land reclaimed from the sea. Only those in Mecca and Medina are bigger.

Critics complain that the close to \$1 billion spent in the 1990s on the Hassan II Great Mosque, which has a thousand ton sliding roof and the world's tallest minaret, could have been better spent on helping people more directly, like cleaning out Casablanca's legendary slums.

The mosque is indeed spectacular, with praying room for more than a 100,000 people. But the problems of the slums are spectacular too – places of mindless violence, desperate poverty and hopelessness.

All 12 suicide bombers who [blew themselves up in Casablanca in 2003](#), killing at least 33 people, were Jihadist products from the local slums. So were the [bombers in 2007](#) who killed a dozen more.

The government is working hard to move the country's slum-dwellers to better homes. But to see the lives of the people still left behind, about half a million people nationwide, is truly shocking – yet in a few cases, humbling and inspiring.

That's because of Boubker Mazoz.



[VIDEO: Teaching self-respect in Casablanca's slums](#)

White-haired, mustached, bronzed, slim and charismatic, the 58-year-old voluntary community organizer is a dead ringer for [Omar Sharif](#), the famous actor. Seven years ago, while continuing with his day job at the public affairs office of the American Embassy, he founded an organization with the goal of bringing hope into the lives of the hopeless.

"Education is everything," he said, as we strolled in one of his classrooms among 10-year-old boys and girls being taught English, French and Arabic by high school seniors, all volunteers, many of them slum-dwellers themselves. "They must stay in school, become independent and especially, not be dragged down by all these stereotypes people have of them that they are failures, criminals, the bottom of society."

Mazoz grew up in Sale, a city near Rabat, and was grateful for the educational opportunities that gave him to make a better life for himself. He's worked at the embassy for the last 30 years – while most of his country cousins are still back in the poor village where his father grew up. When Mazoz came to Casablanca, he wanted to help people make the best of themselves – especially through education.

At the community center I watched as one young girl, her hair covered in Islamic traditional style, enthusiastically pointed at letters. She mouthed them, and two boys and a girl, leaning across the table, one half-sitting on it, stroked the letters with their fingers and imitated her. A drone of English and French and Arabic vowels rolled across the room.

"They're all from the neighborhoods," Mazoz said proudly. "They are such good kids, they just need a chance."

"Who is the girl teaching them?" I asked. And therein lies a tale.

In a dark place – new light

Her name was Leila Gouaich, and she took me to her home in the slum known as Al Hofra, or Big Hole. The sun shone brightly on the apartment buildings next to her home, but her cluster of concrete blocks was in the shade.

We ducked between clothes drying on lines, and brushed by hordes of children playing in the dirt, as older folks sat and chatted or dozed. Young men lounged against walls, their faces blank, yet menacing. One woman watched us through a small square window barely big enough to peer through.

We entered a narrow alley, but it was a boulevard compared to the corridor of warrens that we came to next. Each room was a home, each home connected by a path so narrow that I had to edge sideways. Steep, narrow, broken stairs led to the next floor, where more rooms held families. Roughly 100 people lived in the excuse for a building, with no running water or toilets.

We came to the end of one alley and went into a room. It was about six feet high, seven feet long and four feet wide. Plaster flaked from the ceiling and it smelled damp.

"It used to be the toilet," Leila said. "This is where I live. Ten of us sleep here, including my sister and her husband."

It didn't seem physically possible. "How?" I asked, "Where?" She shrugged and merely said, "It isn't easy."

Leila's father died of cancer when she was three years old. Her mother, who held her hand while she talked to me, is deaf and dumb. It wasn't clear to me how she had grown up. They didn't earn a penny and nobody gave them a penny. I didn't understand how they survived, but it was the same story for almost everybody in the slum.

Leila pointed to the crumbling plaster, and complained of the stench, the damp, the rainwater that poured in through a hole in the wall, the respiratory diseases that were almost universal, as well as the lack of medical insurance, medicines, privacy and above all, dignity.

"I used to hate this place," she said. "It was a place of darkness that robbed me of life, of hope, of everything. People murder for a cell phone or 20 dirhams (\$2). And then I heard about Mr. Mazoz's organization."

A role model for others

When Mazoz first started working in the slums, they were an incredibly dangerous place to be.

"Even the police didn't dare enter," he laughed.

Today, he is received like a rock star, swamped by residents asking for help. Raising funds from charitable donations, he gave this legless old woman a wheelchair, that woman a sewing machine, while this man asked for help to move out, to anywhere. They all needed something and he was the only person who came to help.

When school began this year he gave out more than 500 backpacks filled with new clothes, pens and exercise books. "Remember," he said, "it's all about education, and pride, and role models."

At first, Leila was afraid to go to Mazoz's community center, but when she finally got up enough courage, she was astonished at how well she was received.

"They welcomed me. I had never had anything like that before," she said.

One of her first assignments as a young community worker was to come back to her own slum, with 20 volunteers, to sweep the streets.

Six years later, Leila says that with the knowledge she gained through her community work, she has grown to appreciate the people in her neighborhood, their challenges and their strength. She no longer hates her home, but wants to improve it.

And she has become a role model now. Children crowded around her asking for help to get a backpack and asking how to enroll in classes at Mazoz's community center.

One little boy turned around and she used his back to write down a list of children's names who needed help.

She has come a long way in a short time.

"Boubker gave me money for books," she said, with tears in her eyes. "He helped me all the way. He brought light into my life."

Today, incredibly, this 23-year-old girl from the slums is in her third year at university, studying physics. She wants to be an aircraft technician.

"But where do you study?" I asked her.

"In the street, when everybody has gone to bed," she said.

And now she teaches other slum children to read and write. Four boys and girls, about 10 years old, ran up to her while we visited. I asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. Two wanted to be a doctor, one a pilot, and one a policeman.

If I had asked them the same question five years ago, one of the other volunteers told me, they would have probably ran off with my wallet.

'You gave me my life'

Later in the day, we all returned to the classroom where I had first seen Leila among the volunteers teaching the children. I took her aside and Mazoz joined us to translate.

When I asked how she had changed, how helping others had helped her, after she had been helped by Mazoz, words failed her. She sprung from her chair and embraced Mazoz and kissed him. Then she grabbed his hand and tried to kiss it, but he withdrew it, saying, "No, no, you mustn't do that."

He was clearly moved though. His eyes glistened, as Leila said to him, fighting her emotions, through tears and smiles: "You gave me my life."

For more information on Boubker Mazoz's charity visit the website:

sistercitiesmorocco.org