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 High Atlas Foundation

For sustainable prosperity in Morocco

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## Visionaries Then and Now

*By Thomas Kimmell*

*Marrakech*

*USAID Farmer-to-Farmer Volunteer*

In the 1980's, a solo American made a huge impact on Ouaouizerth, Morocco, an Amazigh village, located in the western High Atlas Mountains. His name was J. Christopher Stevens, a Peace Corps Volunteer and yes the same J. Christopher Stevens, who as American Ambassador in Libya, was killed in the raid on Benghazi in September 11, 2012.

Chris is still remembered here as the husky American that lived by the community's Muslim traditions even though he wasn't a Muslim. He was well known locally because he always was respectful and open to the town's people.

He learned Arabic from Lhoussin Waali, at the time a local grocery owner, who he in turn taught English. One of the ways he taught

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Lhoussin English was having him listen to BBC radio broadcasts. Lhoussin remembers how he and Chris would often discuss the similarities between the Muslim and Christian faiths. The Arabic that Chris learned here helped inspire his career in the Arab world. Chris also was active with kids, teaching English at the local youth center. He was so dedicated to helping the people of Quaouizerth he stayed with them an extra year in the Peace Corps.

He was known locally principally by his last name, Stevens. People recall how Stevens would be invited to tea at someone house and he'd walk there regardless of the distance. He left behind the gift of knowledge. There was great sadness in the village of Ouauizerth when they heard about Stevens's death on television.

Thirty years later an American nonprofit organization founded by former Peace Corp veterans has honored Chris's memory by bringing farming solutions to mostly agricultural Ouauizerth. The High Atlas Foundation, founded by Yossef Ben- Mer of New Mexico, recently dedicated a tree nursery, just outside of town, to the memory of Chris Stevens. The nursery grows almonds and olive seedlings for transplanting. The High Atlas grows these seedlings to give to local farmers at no cost. The farmers' Cooperative (called *Adrar*, or mountain) provides the land for the new orchard and High Atlas supplies the trees and expertise to successfully start the new Orchardists on their way.

While the Stevens-inspired nursery serves the Ouauizerth area; the High Atlas Foundation currently maintains eleven tree nurseries all over Morocco, partnering with the Ecosia Social Enterprise, to replicate this activity to most regions of the country. This is the modern version of "Give a man a fish with the he'll eat for a day, teach a man to fish he'll be fed for a lifetime".

In Ouauizerth village the High Atlas Foundation nursery caretaker is Hicham Farhat and he has become the pied piper of tree growing to the town's people, especially the school children. This week Hicham showed up at the grade school and he and the kids planted olive trees to enhance the school's courtyard. His enthusiasm was only exceeded by the kid's joy and excitement as they helped to plant the trees.

The High Atlas Foundation is dedicated to the single mission of growing seedlings and distributing them to growers who can use them but can't generally afford them. Since each different region has its own growing conditions a variety of trees are grown in the High Atlas nurseries and include carob, walnut, pomegranate, cherry, fig, Argan, and date palm in addition to the previously mentioned almonds and olives. High Atlas has become the "Johnny Appleseed of Morocco" except with more than just one tree to choose from.

As you can imagine, the Moroccan government is an enthusiastic supporter with land contributions to this program, but does not contribute financial support. The primary financial support comes from individual



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donors and grants (such as from Ecosia). The Ouaouizerth nursery's establishment in 2013 was appropriately made possible by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Scientific Research. The obvious benefits are to the growers who plant the trees but the hard to quantify "Green" contributions are substantial. Creating "forests" of orchards creates a carbon displacement mechanism to go along with oxygen generation and erosion prevention. All the nurseries use drip irrigation, a 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, which is right at home in an arid nation with no water resources to spare.

The actions of the High Atlas Foundation fulfill the spirit of what J. Christopher Stevens stood for thirty plus years ago. He had the desire to make things better for Moroccans. The concept of growing and giving away trees is a unique effort, happening only in Morocco. Just as "Stevens" did his best for Moroccans so does High Atlas with its ambitious goal of covering the country with fruit and nuts trees.

Writing this article I realized I too had joined the work of other Americans who have acted in Morocco. My career was spent in irrigation and in Morocco no orchards grow without water. Adding a water component to High Atlas efforts means that the orchards will survive and thrive.

*Tom Kimmell is the retired Executive Director of the Irrigation Association, who now volunteers for the « Farmer to Farmer » program created by the US Congress. Morocco is part of the program and is managed by Land O' Lakes International Development.*

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