

## Testimonies from participants in Offscreen Expeditions<sup>(1)</sup>:

### Cross-cultural exchanges between the UK & Middle East<sup>(2)</sup> 2008

#### "Offscreen: My Experience"

#### Mohammad Daher, Lebanon

6<sup>th</sup> July 2008 was the beginning. As a 16 year old studying art in Lebanon, I was given the opportunity of a lifetime - to complete a two-week residency in the UK with seven other artists from the UAE, Bahrain and Oman. The trip had a firm aim: to build a bridge, to forge a connection and to do this through young artists who were just beginning their careers, full of energy, dreams and curiosity. "I was selected from hundreds of applicants to take part in this residency initiated by Offscreen. It was not a typical residency - a static experience in one gallery in one particular place - rather, it was a full-scale journey across England, Scotland and Wales, making artwork in situ, in response to our unfamiliar surroundings.

We traveled from London to Scotland to Wales and back. I met British artists, priests, farmers, politicians and protestors. I worked with art students my own age to produce a series of collaborative collages that were later exhibited in a group show of all our work in London. One of the art pieces was stimulated by the collective question, "What does the UK mean to us?"

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(1) In 2008, eight young art students from the Middle East were selected from hundreds of applicants to take part in a 14-day creative adventure organised by Offscreen, a London-based arts organization founded in 2004 to develop cultural and arts projects between the UK and Middle East. The countries selected to be involved in 2008 were Bahrain, Oman, the UAE and Lebanon. Offscreen is currently recruiting young people from Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan and Pakistan for the next Expedition to the UK, due to take place in July 2010.

(2) <http://www.offscreenexpedition.com/>

I didn't know that I would learn so much. All eight of us learned much. We each had new convictions about the country we felt we knew so much about in such a short time. We saw the shrinking distance between the two worlds and found a way to honestly accept one other. We took so much from these places, but the most important part was the communication, the interaction and the direct contact with the people there, even between 8 students from Lebanon, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman, and how we were expressing it through art.

"I just want to be an inspiring person."

### **Bashayer Al-Mahdi, Bahrain**

"I didn't expect to win the competition. It was truly an honour to learn that I would be representing Bahrain as a young artist and travel to the UK for this creative adventure. With an abundance of negative imagery, caricatures and stereotypes currently available of both the Middle East and the West, I think it has become more crucial to forge cultural understanding between the two regions, promote 'moderate voices' and empower young people from both areas to become leaders and role models

I am in my first year of studying Multimedia at Al-Ahlia University. I began drawing when I was a child but developed my style until I went to high school four years ago. I may be young but I am committed to a career in art. Firstly, I wish to graduate from university with a high grade because my major is arts-related; I would like to put on local and international exhibitions that show my unique style of painting. When all is said and done, I just want to be an inspiring person for people around me.

**"A turning point in my life."**

**Mohammed Alkaabi, Dubai**

The Offscreen Expedition in July 2008 was a turning point in my life. I used to be a careless and reckless young guy; I barely cared about what was happening around me. Getting accepted for the residency was incredible, but I quickly became disillusioned and almost dropped out. My reason? I didn't think it would be exciting. But this was before I arrived at Heathrow Airport: from the first moment I set foot in London I knew that I had been mistaken. I saw the rest of the group of young artists waiting at the arrivals gate and knew everything was going to be alright.

During the Expedition I was exposed to elements, with long walks, long hours and lots of travelling. It was also the first time in my life that I had been so far from my family. At the start of the journey, I fell into my old habits, losing my temper

Daher: Testimonies from participants \_\_\_\_\_

quickly and not listening to others. But the Offscreen team, Stephen, Jamie, Aya and Robert, not to mention countless others, never gave up on me. They changed my life.

"When I get the chance to talk about something special in my life, I always talk about the Offscreen Expedition. It not only gave me the motivation to aim high, but the communication and teamwork skills that will last me my whole life. And here I am, two years later, studying a degree in Communications in the United States."

The Offscreen Expedition was not a tour or a vacation; it was a personal journey and a group one. I got from it as much as I put in. Jamie was a tough leader, like a Commander in the army! But from him, I learned how to manage my time. Also, he inspired me to respect other people's time. Stephen was different, a unique man with a whole host of artistic talents. From him, I learned how to communicate with different kinds of people, even if I do not have much in common with them.

And the outcome of the Expedition? Here I am, 18 years old, in the United States, a student in Communications representing not just myself, but my family and my country. When I get the chance to talk about something special in my life, I always talk about the Offscreen Expedition, and how everything changed since it took place. Among other things, the expedition was a start for I where I am now, and a start for studying abroad.

I will never forget those fourteen days in the UK.

Terre Haute, USA

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