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Witness to History

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Witness to

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Nadia Abraibesh '10 left for Benghazi, Libya, last fall to spend time with her father's family, learn Arabic and work in a European school. Within a few months, she became not only a witness to, but also a participant in, the historical uprising that Libyans labeled "a dream come true.")



Our emotions were swirling as rumors of a possible uprising against the Gaddafi regime circulated during the weeks leading up to Feb. 17. When I asked family and friends in Libya whether they thought people would demonstrate, they consistently said, "No, people are too scared." I had heard my dad's stories of Gaddafi's

brutality, but could not comprehend what it was like to watch friends hanged in the streets, or convicted without a trial. I realized I had to censor myself in public and in phone calls to family and friends in the States. Everyone knew someone who had been arrested for using the wrong search terms in an Internet search or for saying the wrong thing in public.

On Feb. 17, I wanted to rush out and join the protesters, but my family stopped me. After the military opened fire on protesters the next day, I realized that is exactly what my family feared – and expected – to happen. I went to sleep and woke up to gunfire for several days. Each morning we found bullets in our yard.

Over the coming weeks, I saw things I never dreamed I would witness. When we heard reports of foreign mercenaries breaking into houses and killing families, our neighborhood created a "defense group" consisting of 40 young men who patrolled the outskirts of the neighborhood.

One of my cousins frantically ran around the house and yelled out to me: "Nadia! Help me find the slaughtering knives!" When I jumped up to help she said, "This is just like a film, isn't it?" I thought, "Yeah – a horror film." Images from *Hotel Rwanda* kept going through my mind – even in our homes we weren't safe. We found the slaughtering knives, sharpened them and kept them with us all night. We didn't get much sleep those first few nights. Each morning it would hit me, like a punch to the face: "Wow, this is actually real..."

Another cousin went daily to the courthouse – where the revolution had begun and where people were congregating. He provided technical support to the lawyers and judges who were trying to create some kind of order. On the sixth day of the uprising he took me with him. I was the first "foreigner" to go inside. The courthouse was chaotic with everyone working as quickly as possible. I was asked to fix the copy machine in the "media" room and thought to myself, "I don't even know how to use it, how can I fix it?" Somehow I managed to repair it and was designated "the copy machine person." It was nice to feel useful.

I soon joined in the demonstrators outside the courthouse and took part in a walk for women, organized after Gaddafi said that the women were too scared to leave their houses. It was exhilarating to join other women, including family members, and show Gaddafi we weren't afraid, even though we all feared the sounds of airplanes and gunfire.

Nadia Abraibesh, top right, and her cousin, and below, a demonstration at the courthouse in Benghazi.



history

When we arrived at the courthouse we were greeted by a breathtaking scene – thousands and thousands of people with no end in sight. The atmosphere was full of determination and passion. People chanted and listened to speeches delivered from a courthouse second-story window. When it was announced that CNN, the first media team to enter the country, had arrived, the crowd went wild and it brought me to tears. People were so excited to finally have a news crew reporting from Benghazi.

As foreign journalists started flowing into Benghazi, I began showing some around the courthouse and the city. Even with my poor Arabic, I was able to serve as a translator. The people of Benghazi treated the journalists and reporters as celebrities. Citizens would approach us when they learned there was a journalist in our group and say, “I *have* to share my story with you.” The journalists listened to tales of terrible acts committed by the Gaddafi regime – stories people had not been allowed to share for 42 years for fear of retaliation. For the first time in their lives, many felt free to speak their mind.

During those few weeks I was overcome with a kaleidoscope of emotions, from complete excitement as a result of good news to total despair, wondering if I would wake up in the morning. I wanted to be part of a revolution that could end Gaddafi’s rule, but I also recognized that each time I went into the streets or helped journalists, there was a chance I could be killed. Death was all around us. My aunts were going to funerals on a daily basis for neighbors and friends that had been killed. Everyone knew someone who had been killed or injured by the gun fire. One of my uncles was shot in the foot while merely standing outside to observe what was happening in the streets. Amid all the horror that resulted from people seeking justice, freedom and dignity,

I also saw much happiness, excitement and pride for what was unfolding. After Benghazi came under the control of the people, I was speechless as I witnessed citizens cleaning the litter and garbage off the streets. This was a city that has always been covered in garbage. It had frustrated me that no one cared enough to clean it up. Now people told me that they were cleaning up the streets because it was their city, not Gaddafi’s. I, too, felt that this was my city and, for the first time in my American-dominated life, I felt like a Libyan.

One day, after nearly a month, I was talking to my dad on the phone and he said, “Your mom cried all night last night. She’s hysterical. Maybe it’s time to start thinking about coming back.” My family in Libya was also putting pressure on me to leave due to the increasing uncertainty of the situation. I said I would leave in two weeks, but I left four days later.

My cousin drove our uncle to Cairo for medical treatment for his wound because the Benghazi hospitals didn’t have the supplies to treat him. That provided my best opportunity to leave. I was extremely upset to leave my relatives in Libya, but knew it was time.

Since returning to the U.S., I have been asked repeatedly whether this experience will affect my plans. There is no doubt it was a life-changing experience and it probably will influence the direction my life takes. However, I don’t have a definite answer. It has reinforced the idea of pursuing a career in international relations, human rights or conflict resolution, but I still don’t know where my future lies. In 10 years, I think I will look back and may have the answer for how this time affected me. For now, this experience was amazing, crazy, sad, scary, exhilarating, inspiring, and yes, life-changing, but ask me for the details in 10 years. 🌸

– Nadia Abraibesh '10

