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Ann Aubry
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Author and former Moroccan prisoner Ali Bourequat talks with Valerie Orlando, associate professor of French, who invited him to help teach her May Term class.

Former Moroccan Political Prisoner Inspires IWU Class to Think Globally

May 23, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - A small class of advanced French students at Illinois Wesleyan University has spent three weeks learning directly from an author about his experiences as a political prisoner in Morocco for 18 years.

Once a secret service agent for then-King Hassan II, Ali Bourequat was thrown into prison and spent years in an underground cell with no light and little water, never formally tried on the false accusations of political conspiracy against the king. Bourequat described how he survived his captivity in Tazmamart Prison in his 1993 book *Dix-huit ans de solitude*, or *Eighteen Years of Solitude*. He was invited to work with the May Term class of Valerie Orlando, associate professor of French, who is translating his book into English.

Bourequat was released in 1991 along with the other Tazmamart survivors, following efforts by Amnesty International and the American government. He is now a U.S. citizen making his home in Texas.

Orlando and Bourequat share a mission of helping the students be globally aware, and to realize how the power and actions of the United States affect people in other countries. To point out that the type of abuse Bourequat suffered is not unique to North Africa, Orlando drew parallels to the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib by American forces, which has prompted military court martials and investigation by the United Nations Committee Against Torture.

Orlando asked students to consider why it is that people abuse the rights of others -- is it innate in the human condition to want to commit such abuse, or do political pressures impose the behavior on us? In the process, all class discussions were conducted in French. Senior Sarah Collins said she appreciated the deeper thinking the class inspires.

"It's a challenge because it's not just about the easy answer, learn it and move on," she said. "It stays with you and you're forced to keep confronting these ideas."

"There's always the fear of history repeating itself," said junior Rebecca Segal. "It's our duty as human beings to educate ourselves about events like this, even though it's really dark and depressing and hard to handle."

Junior Brian Egdorf sees the value of having Bourequat himself participate. "I took another class on post-colonial (French) literature, and I just felt really distant. We were looking at it from behind a curtain; we didn't have the writer sitting right there to talk to us and tell us what happened."

"Before I took this course, I didn't really realize what's going on (elsewhere)," said junior Erin Moll. "Especially in an academic environment, we're absorbed in what we're doing. ... I think this class has really made me do a self-check (and realize) there are lots of other things that I should be concerned about. I should really reach out and do something about it."

Bourequat is pleased with the students' motivation. Speaking through Orlando as interpreter, he said, "If Americans were more concerned about what was going on (in our country and around the world), we would have a totally different way of going about our politics."

Illinois Wesleyan University's May Term is a three-week session during which students are immersed in a single class, and faculty are encouraged to develop innovative courses around a central theme. This year's theme was "With Malice Toward None."