

Algerian Enriches Rural America One Plate of Couscous at a Time

Frederique Boudouani plans global peace initiative based in Elkader, Iowa

(Source : America.gov)



Frederique Boudouani and Brian Bruening in front of an Abd al-Qadir portrait at Schera's
By M. Scott Bortot

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Washington — One of the most remarkable things about Elkader, Iowa, is its name: Settlers in 1846 chose it to honor the hero of far-away Algeria's fight for independence, Abd al-Qadir.

Another remarkable thing about this rural town of 1,500 people in the middle of the United States is that one of its newest residents chose to move there from a city 1,000 miles away because he, like the town's name, is from Algeria.

Now, this Algerian American and the townspeople embrace each other in a relationship that highlights the good that comes from caring about people who live down the street, or on the other side of the world.

In 2008, Elkader faced a natural disaster when the Turkey River flooded. Residents piled up sandbags to hold off the deluge. Frederique Boudouani was among them.

"He probably worked 72 hours straight just sandbagging to keep the river out," said longtime resident Donald Harstad. "You couldn't tell the difference between him and somebody who had been born here."

Since moving from Boston in 2006, Boudouani has put a mark on Elkader. He and his partner have started a restaurant along the river on Main Street — Algerian-American, of course — and he has revitalized Elkader's sister-city association and is planning to launch a business incubator.

But his vision for the town is bigger still.

“What is interesting about Elkader ... is that it has the potential of being a cornerstone for global peace and understanding,” Boudouani told *America.gov*. “I really, truly believe in that.”

Why would an Algerian-born American computer engineer, who never lived in a city with fewer than 2 million people, move to rural Iowa to cook chicken bastilla, couscous and cheeseburgers for farmers and shop owners?

As with many Muslim Americans, the September 11, 2001, terror attacks led Boudouani to soul searching. He said Arabs and Muslims, already often defined by negative stereotypes, needed to react.

“Any good Muslim or Arab trying to change that image would do anything they can to change it,” Boudouani said. “I am here to show people that we are not part of the extreme fringe. People in the media tend to focus on that, but there is a flip side to the coin.”

In trying to make sense of September 11, Boudouani researched the history of Islam in America. And what he found amazed him. It turned out that the first mosque built in the United States is in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He was even more intrigued when he discovered that a town in the state was named for a historic Arab leader.

“To my great surprise, and a lot of jubilation, it happened to be Abd al-Qadir, the George Washington of Algeria,” Boudouani said. Three Americans, who were not of Arab or Muslim heritage, founded the town and named it to honor the Algerian nationalist who resisted French colonial occupation.

“There isn’t a month in the year when we don’t have some Algerian, or someone who knows about Abd al-Qadir, who travels great lengths to come to this town,” Boudouani said.

Visiting Elkader turned out to be easy for Boudouani. Brian Bruening, his business partner, is from another Iowa town not far from Elkader. Boudouani and Bruening made their way to Elkader several times while on visits from Boston and fell in love with the place. Shortly after, they decided to relocate.

Boudouani holds a doctorate degree in computer engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Bruening has a master’s degree in creative writing, but those credentials would do them little good at first in Elkader. So they opened a restaurant, Schera’s, named for Boudouani’s sister, Scherazade, and to honor the character in *One Thousand and One Nights*.



The Elkader and Mascara, Algeria, sister city relationship is thriving in part because of Boudouani.

Schera's serves a medley of Algerian and American foods and offers customers the chance to learn more about the Arab and Muslim world by speaking with Boudouani.

"Every time there is something in the news, and I don't think this is a particular phenomenon to Arabs and Muslims, you are the de facto representative for millions of people, and people need to talk to you for information and for your thoughts," Boudouani said.

Harstad said Boudouani helps people learn about the world at the restaurant.

"If anybody has any questions, he is able to talk about anything, even the French in Algeria," Harstad said. "He is very well informed and will give you as much a history lesson as you can take that day."

History lessons aside, Boudouani just likes to cook and serve good food. He said food unites people from different cultures.

"In all honesty, it warms my heart to see someone who is raised in Elkader and has been a farmer his whole life come in, order couscous, loves it, and comes back again and again," Boudouani said.

Boudouani also has taken charge of Elkader's sister cities program. One of the smallest communities in the sister cities network, which is designed for cultural exchanges, Elkader formally ratified its relationship in 1984 with Mascara, Algeria. The pairing makes sense: Mascara is Abd al-Qadir's birthplace.

Harstad said the sister cities program helps Elkader residents learn about Arab culture.

"We have sent people over to Algeria many times, and vice versa, and they have always had a fine time," Harstad said. Boudouani facilitates the visits of Algerians and other Arabs to the town. "They are very cooperative and a very nice people."

The relationship also has a humanitarian dimension: After the 2008 flood, the Algerian government sent \$150,000 to the people of Elkader to help them get on with their lives.

The flood nearly ruined Schera's, which sits along the riverbank. It sustained about \$250,000 in damage and was closed for several months, Boudouani said. Part of the dining area remains closed.

"It is one thing when you're in business for 20 years and a flood of epic proportions happens, but it is a completely different story when you are in business for a year and a half," he said. "You are still building your infrastructure, you are still building your reputation, and something this devastating happens."

The flood also highlighted the kindness of Iowans. Boudouani and Bruening received help from people they didn't even know.

"We had people drive in from Des Moines, people we had never met, spend the whole day cleaning for us. And cleaning after a flood is no fun job," Boudouani said. People even sent checks to help them re-launch Schera's. "The outpouring of support was just amazing. I still get choked up about it."

While continuing to run the revived restaurant, Boudouani also is moving forward with a computer business, Elkader Technologies. And he aims to make the town a small center for high-tech work.

Boudouani said he has noticed since moving to Iowa that many university graduates must leave the state in search of jobs. To give them an alternative, he said, he plans to create a business incubator through Elkader Technologies.

"The mid- to longer-term vision is that we are in discussion with some colleges and universities in the area, and the idea is to expand their geographical reach by offering classes within our business," Boudouani said. "It's a win-win situation for both entities."

The business incubator would serve as a step in Boudouani's greater vision for Elkader, the vision that attracted him to the town in the first place.

"Within the building that is going to house the business incubator, there is another side that we can turn into the Algerian-American Center for Global Peace and Understanding," he said. "I didn't come to Elkader to become a millionaire. I came here because it is a labor of love, and because of the vision."