

Iowa's Algerian Connection

How many Iowans know that the northeast Iowa town of Elkader was named for an Algerian Muslim leader in 1846? Or that Abraham Lincoln admired the Emir Abd el-Kader, whom *The New York Times* hailed as “one of the few great men of the century”?

Photo by Jim Heemstra



Two Grinnell faculty members recently traveled to Elkader, a town of about 1,500, to celebrate the town's cultural heritage, and to participate in events surrounding the launch of a new book by John Kiser about el-Kader, the town's namesake.

Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader (Monkfish Book Publishing, 2008), is a biography of the Muslim leader, a humanitarian and resistance fighter against French colonization of Algeria.

Professor of French Jan Gross, her husband and faculty colleague Dan Gross (Alternate Languages Study Option), and Grinnell restaurateur Kamal Hammouda recently joined Kiser and Elkader citizens to discuss their experiences in relation to Algeria and Islam. In celebration of the 200th birthday of the town's namesake, the panelists explored the role of religious values and how Muslims are viewed in a post-9/11 world.

It all started because of a restaurant. Last summer, when

Gross hosted an Algerian guest, she was curious to visit an Iowa town that reportedly had an Algerian connection, including a restaurant known as Schera's. Restaurant co-owner Frédérique Boudouani greeted Gross and her family, and invited them to take a personal tour of the community.

During that chance visit, Gross made many connections, including former Mayor Ed Olson and president of the Sister Cities program Kathy Garms. Gross learned about Elkader's longstanding connection to Algeria, a focal point of her research. Elkader has nurtured a 25-year relationship with its sister city, Mascara, Algeria, and the two communities have exchanged delegations and visitors. This year, the Algerian government sent Elkader a \$150,000 gift for flood relief. Several years earlier, Elkader sent funds to Mascara to rebuild after an earthquake.

Gross was impressed. “Elkader takes a personal and broad approach to its history

and mission,” she explains. “I share Elkader's interest in developing outreach to help others understand a part of the world that is so often misunderstood.”

Gross and her husband have translated several works by Algerian authors into English, including a major novel about a 9/11 terrorist. For the hosts of several Algerian visitors to Grinnell, Elkader was a surprising discovery.

“I couldn't believe that Elkader was just a few hours up the road!” she says.

Gross is part of an effort to develop Arabic language instruction on campus, and to add related courses. She plans to continue working on the Iowa-Algeria connection.

“It's encouraging to see how the Grinnell-Elkader story responds to four of Grinnell's important initiatives,” she says. “International studies, peace studies, Islamic and Middle East/North Africa studies, and even prairie studies!”