



Ibtisam BenAmer

Tibra Spotlight, July 2004

*by Catherine and Mahmoud Dreiza**

Ibtisam BenAmer is in the prime of her life. Even at her young age she has lead a life more colorful than most. Life has taken this Benghazi native to all corners of the world and given her the flair required to astonish everyone she meets.

Ibtisam was born in Benghazi in 1949 into a family that valued education highly. She lived among many relatives, from her extended family, and there was a very strong sense of community. More important, her parents, Hussein and Hamida BenAmer, made sure their children received the best education they could have. Ibtisam attended the *Birka Primary* in Benghazi. She walked to the school with relatives—there were so many of them that the school felt like home, Ibtisam recalls.

Ibtisam's mother, [Hamida**](#), who was Libya's first female radio presenter, was a great inspiration to her daughter. During the summer months, never one to leave her children idle, she would take Ibtisam and her brothers to a school run by USAid in Benghazi. This was Ibtisam's first taste of what would later become her worldly education.

Ibtisam became the eldest daughter in the BenAmer household when her sister Amina got married. Although still a child, that led her to take on a growing proportion of her mother's responsibilities. This included caring for a large number of siblings when her mother had to be away from home, such as the time when her grandfather died. This life experience at an early age meant that she matured very quickly and would serve her well soon thereafter.



*Ibtisam & Moustafa with
Catherine & Mahmoud at their
wedding*



Ibtisam and Moustafa

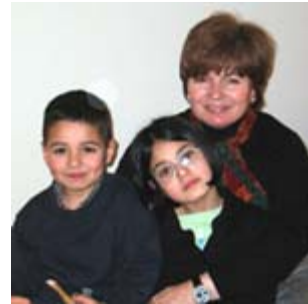
In 1965 a gentleman named Moustafa Dreiza appeared to ask her hand in marriage. They were soon wed, and at the tender age of sixteen Ibtisam left Libya before completing her secondary education and joined her husband in Paris, where he was working at the Libyan embassy. Leaving before taking her final examinations was a difficult decision; however, she would not be away from school for long. Moustafa encouraged her to go to school, and soon French classes occupied her time and made her fluent in that

language. Nevertheless, before she could become too comfortable in her surroundings, her husband was transferred to the United Nations in New York. It was there that she had her first child, Randa, and where she became fluent in her third language, English. Her vivid memories of life in New York include delaying her trip to the maternity ward to watch the end of *The Fugitive* TV series, and watching the terrible news of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

The couple and their daughter returned to Libya for a while where their second child, Tareq, was born. Ibtisam wanted to complete her high school exams at this time, but soon they were setting off for a four-year post in Tokyo. During this period, Ibtisam had a very lively time to say the least. Her typical day involved preparing the children for daycare; taking lessons in tennis, Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement), and Chinese calligraphy; performing housework; and attending evening receptions as the wife of a diplomat. She even exhibited her work in Ikebana and Chinese calligraphy to the public. The rank of holding three degrees in Ikebana qualified to teach the subject, and when she returned to Libya later, she set up a class in the *Oea Women's Club* in Tripoli. The family was also able to enjoy trips to such places as Taiwan and Thailand which helped them grow an appreciation for their own homeland and culture. In 1974 they returned to Libya and settled in Tripoli – for a while!

Ibtisam BenAmer
<p>Born: 1949, Benghazi, Libya</p> <p>Current residence: Tripoli, Libya</p> <p>Family: - Moustafa Dreiza, husband - Randa and Dina, daughters - Tareq, Mahmoud and Muizz, sons</p> <p>Parents: - Hamida and Hussein BenAmer</p> <p>Education: - BA, English Literature, University of Philippines, 1981 - Degree in Interior Design, Manilla, 1985</p> <p>Interests: - Ikebana - Chinese calligraphy - Fluent in French and English</p> <p>Occupation: - Businesswoman - Oea Women's Club, Advisor</p>

In 1975 Ibtisam was busy studying for her secondary school matriculation. She was also pregnant with her third child, Mahmoud. She fondly recalls squeezing into the tiny Libyan school benches, not designed for an 8-month-pregnant woman, when taking the exams. Ibtisam received word she had passed the exams soon after going into labor. In 1976 Ibtisam started a correspondence course with the university in Benghazi and successfully completed the first year of a sociology degree. Her dream was to study English Literature, but that was not available by correspondence, and she could not be a full-time student with three young children.



With grandchildren, Kemal and Meral, Randa's kids



Tareq visiting Korea

The family's next move was back to Asia in 1977. This time, it was an eight-year stint in Manila. Ibtisam was now determined to start a university degree, and she did! In 1981 she graduated from the University of the Philippines with a degree in English Literature. Borrowing from a theme she set with her third child, she was again at a late stage of pregnancy during her finals at UP and delivered her fourth child, Muizz, between exams and the graduation ceremony. Ibtisam added one more degree, in interior design, before leaving Manila to return to Tripoli in 1985.



Muizz, her fourth child

Back in Tripoli, and with her husband retired from the diplomatic service, Ibtisam immediately turned her attention to business. Drawing on what she had learned in Asia, she started a business arranging silk flowers, which she imported from the Philippines, and selling them through a store owned by a friend. The plants sold very quickly and were in great demand. Soon, cheap knockoffs sprang up and Ibtisam decided to diversify. In 1990 she gave birth to Dina, her youngest child. Dina has brought Ibtisam and Moustafa so much energy and joy that only a young child can.



Dina, a source of renewal!



*Arab Businesswomen Meeting,
Jordan, 1999*

In 1992 Ibtisam opened a store in Benghazi selling hardwood furniture from Asia as well as arts and crafts. She would routinely travel to Hong Kong, Beijing, and Seoul to find the best items to stock her store. Soon, she followed up her success with the opening of a second branch of the store in Tripoli. During those years, Ibtisam was an active member of the *Oea Women's Club* in Tripoli whose goals are to promote understanding and friendship among international women. The club is attended by many foreign residents in Tripoli; Ibtisam was the Libyan advisor. She helped organize cultural exchanges that included trips to the

mountains and deserts of Libya, as well as charitable fundraisers that aided causes such as orphanages in Libya.

Her husband, Moustafa, retired a few years ago and the couple is busy raising Dina and visiting family and friends all over the world. Ibtisam BenAmer's energy and progress are truly an inspiration for Libyan women everywhere.

* *Mahmoud and Catherine are Ibtisam's son and daughter-in-law.*

** <http://www.tibra.org/june02/home.htm>

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