VH EXPRESS II The story of

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Jack Rusenko:

a ruined birthday

July 23, 1999: **death of Hassan II**

THE DIRECTOR OF GEORGE WASHINGTON ACADEMY OF CASABLANCA WAS PREPARING TO CELEBRATE HIS 40TH BIRTHDAY, ON A CERTAIN JULY 23RD …

"I was born on July 23rd, 1959. That day I was celebrating my 40th birthday. We had been living in Morocco since 1992. But I was on summer vacation in the United States, in Pittsburgh, my hometown, with my wife and children. It was the morning of my birthday, and we were getting ready for the party. It was then that we heard the news about the death of Hassan II. We were shocked. Just the year before we had opened the school, we had recruited teachers… and now we didn't know what would happen. I spent all day on the phone with contacts from Morocco and from the U.S. A friend of mine from the Senate, who ran for President in the last elections, Sam Brownback, was then Head of the Foreign Relations Committee, called[*nb] to tell me he was boarding a plane for Morocco in order to be present at the funeral, and to ask me some in-depth questions on the situation.

All the foreigners living in Morocco were worried: we didn't know what to expect, and we were prepared for the worst. The future was a big question mark. It was my job to ensure the security of the personnel we had hired in Morocco. But what could we tell them? We advised them to stay in their homes, and to avoid going out if possible. There was little coverage on U.S. television about the King's death, since the event coincided with the disappearance of John-John Kennedy, and all the media's efforts and attentions were focused on him. As a result, I had to keep myself informed through the internet. In the end, nothing serious happened, except for the fact that everyone was in mourning. The emotion of the people, who wailed and cried, was very touching. It was then that we realized that most Moroccans living at the time had never experienced a life without of Hassan II.

In the United States, people don't understand the meaning of a kingdom. I tried to explain to my friends that he was almost like the grandfather of the country: his authority was

above politics. And when the Moroccans lost him, it was incredibly emotional and difficult. As for me, I had the privilege of meeting him in person one year before his death. I found him to be a very educated, very intelligent man. I also felt that he was in fragile health and he walked very slowly. I was very sorry to see him go.

Very quickly, we foreigners understood that everything would be fine (would work itself out). Ten years later, we realize that things went even better than expected. During this time, two things made an impression on me. The first was the day Driss Basri left. I can't begin to tell you how many people called me, influential people as well! Everyone called each other: it was like liberation. Within two years we found ourselves with Driss Jettou as Minister of the Interior. The day of his nomination, I thought to myself: 'What advancements we've made in only two years!' In my opinion, this change was a radical one.

The other thing that touched me concerns the Moudawana (family law). Three or four years before his death, Hassan II had begun talking about reforming it. And as soon as Mohammed VI acceded to the throne, he brought the topic up again. But years passed without any sign of change… I began to be/get worried about the absence of reform. Then came the attacks of May 16th, 2003. Within the span of only a few months, his Majesty announced a new Moudawana, taking advantage of the Islamists' weakness. What that made me realize was that kings never forget, they have their goals; politics are politics and they can't always do what they want, when they want it, but they always reach their goals in the end. That is the advantage of monarchies: to be able to enact reforms at the most favorable moments because they have the advantage of longevity."

*nb   The author slightly confused the facts. It was actually Senator Brownback's staff member that called Jack, not the Senator himself.