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# Class Action



**EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED**  
When he posted the Craigslist ad, Amine Bouchentouf thought he'd pick up a teaching gig. What he found, instead, was a new career. Photograph by Bob Handelman

# Trading Spaces

How does one go from working on Wall Street to writing *Arabic for Dummies*?

BY BRIAN EULE

**A** MINE BOUCHENTOUF '03 doesn't remember the exact wording of the ad he posted on Craigslist—the popular Internet bulletin board used to search for jobs, apartments, and items to sell and buy—but it was something like this: *Native Arabic Speaker. Middlebury College Graduate. Teaching Experience. Offering Arabic language and Arabic immersion service.* He added his phone number and e-mail address.

Bouchentouf had taught an Arabic seminar when he was an undergrad, and the Morocco native was contemplating ways he could share his culture with people in the United States and bridge the gap between “two entities that were in a state of complete communication breakdown after 9/11.” Although he hadn't given much thought about how he would put together a class, Bouchentouf felt that his reliance on discipline and structure would allow him to fit another activity into an already hectic lifestyle. At the time, he was working as an analyst on the trading desk of a Wall Street firm, waking up

at five each morning and getting to work between six and six-thirty so he could conduct research in preparation for the market's open bell, at nine. He thrived on the pressure and intensity and burned off stress at his local gym each evening. One more challenge, one more thing added to his day, sounded just fine.

Two years later, Bouchentouf sits in a large diner in Manhattan's Upper East Side and laughs at this recollection. With a high forehead and a receding hairline, he looks older than his 25 years. That Craigslist posting? It changed his life in ways he never would have imagined. He has written one book on Arabic and is in the process of writing another; he's created a Web page ([www.al-baab.com](http://www.al-baab.com)) to serve as the “gateway between the West and the Middle East”; and yes, he teaches classes on the subject.

Bouchentouf seems to feel comfortable in this diner—“Googies,” it's called—and he often comes with his laptop so that he can crank out some work. On this chilly New York evening, though, the laptop is absent. On the table instead are Bouchentouf's iPod, a plate of food, and an



unopened copy of Living Language's *Complete Arabic: The Basics*.

When he posted the ad on Craigslist, Bouchentouf had never heard of Living Language. About two weeks after the posting though, he received a phone call from

**BRIDGING CULTURES**  
Equally at home in the U.S. and his native Morocco, Bouchentouf—here dining at Le Souk in NYC—wants his work to serve as a gateway between the West and the Middle East.

Chris Warnasch, who said he was with the organization and that he had seen Bouchentouf's ad online. Assuming that Living Language was the name of a school, Bouchentouf was surprised to learn that it was a division of Random House that produces language "courses," boxed sets of course books and recordings, usually on compact disc. Warnasch was its



editorial director.

The publishing house had been in search of an author to write an Arabic course book, and Warnasch had been talking to several professors of Middle Eastern studies but had yet to find the right fit. He still isn't sure why he

looked on Craigslist that day. "I must have been looking for a piece of furniture or something and it was on my mind," he says. On a lark, he decided to enter the word "Arabic" into its search engine. It was an unusual thing for Warnasch to do, a method of looking for a writer that he had never used before. "I didn't expect to find anyone at all," he says. When he saw Bouchentouf's

Bouchentouf had never published anything; he hadn't even written a thesis in college. But he did have plenty of experience with languages, speaking five: French, Arabic, English, Italian, and Spanish. For the 10 days that followed Warnasch's phone call, Bouchentouf used his evenings and weekends to work on the proposal, with plenty of black coffee to help.

Warnasch liked the pro-

**That Craigslist posting? It changed his life in ways he never would have imagined.**

posting, he noticed that the recent grad had come from Middlebury, where he knew there was a strong language program. So he decided to contact this aspiring teacher. ("I like the idea of working with teachers who have to come up with a scrappy way of teaching and tutoring," he explains.) That same day, he asked Bouchentouf to do a proposal for the book, with a table of contents and a sample chapter.

"I think I had just finished a rough day," says Bouchentouf, picking up the story. "I really didn't know what to make of it. I thought that this was something small. I thought that they had someone to write the book and that they wanted a tech editor or someone to complement the writing of the book."

An economics major,

proposal and offered Bouchentouf the job. "Amine seemed like someone who could fit with my insane schedule," notes the editor, who was in a rush to produce the book.

While writing *Complete Arabic*, Bouchentouf kept his job at the trading desk, writing in the evenings and on weekends. He continued to consume copious amounts of coffee and discovered that his obsessive tendencies—for instance, he often plays the same song on his iPod, repeating as many as 12 times because the repetitive rhythms relax him—allowed him to pull off the lifestyle of having two demanding jobs. After the book was published last April, he decided to take his writing in a different direction.

*Complete Arabic* is for the really serious student, he

notes, and he was interested in making the language more accessible to the general populace. He decided that there should be an *Arabic for Dummies*.

Bouchentouf went in search of a literary agent, something he had not known about during his previous negotiations. Though he didn't find one on Craigslist—"I think he found me in the phonebook," says agent Mark Sullivan with a laugh—the result was the same. "The thing that struck me about Amine is how easy it is to talk to him about anything," Sullivan says. "He knows so much about so many things. Amine is more like that than anyone I know." Sullivan decided to represent him, and the two secured a deal for *Arabic for Dummies*. Bouchentouf left his Wall Street job and spent the second half of 2005 writing his second book.

"I want to introduce as many people as possible to the Arabic language," Bouchentouf says. With a long history of public service in his family, he says that he wants to do "something that's going to be helpful to people. I really see it as a way of giving back."

Not that he doesn't get a kick out of all this. Recently, he found himself in a bookstore and saw a woman holding *Complete Arabic*. Bouchentouf walked up to her and said, "So, you're learning Arabic?"

"Yeah," the woman said.

Bouchentouf replied, "I wrote that book you're holding," and the two began talking about her upcoming trip—to the Middle East. 🐾

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