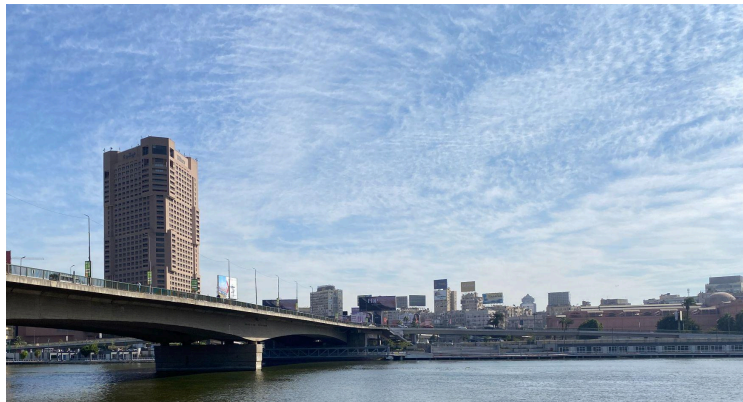


## Lumos Final Report

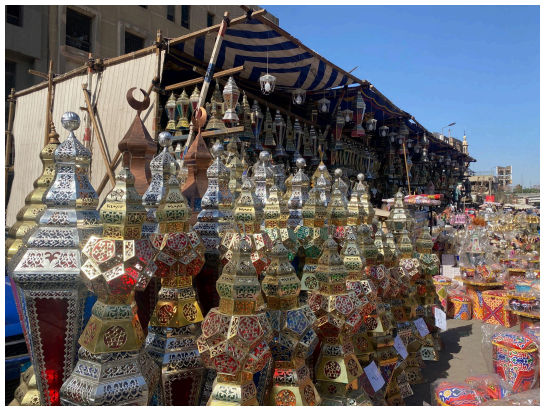
Before my Lumos travel, I expected to gain significant experience in data analysis and return home well-prepared for a corporate job in the U.S. However, I was quickly faced with the reality that I have been very fortunate in my education and the resources available to me, a privilege not shared by all countries. Still, my time with BLESSEgypt allowed me to become proficient in Excel—a tool I had previously used only briefly. I was pleased to offer my limited knowledge of free online resources that could simplify their daily tasks. For instance, they hadn't realized they could upload documents to OneDrive and collaborate in real time, instead of their initial plan of emailing documents back and forth after each person completed their section.

My experience with BLESSEgypt opened my eyes to the extent of my privilege and the things I take for granted every day. I had the opportunity to speak with Sudanese refugees whom BLESS was helping, and it was one of the most moving experiences of my entire stay. Hearing how much they had lost and how dramatically their lives had been upended, yet seeing their gratitude for the little they had left, was incredibly humbling. I also got to interact with some Egyptians who were living in extremely poor conditions, but their joy in life didn't come from possessions; it stemmed from the communities of loved ones they built around them. Egypt's proximity to the Sahara Desert puts its people at a disadvantage, as sand blows into the cities, leaving the streets and buildings dusty. Nevertheless, there are people whose sole job is to sweep and clean the streets, a testament to their resilience.

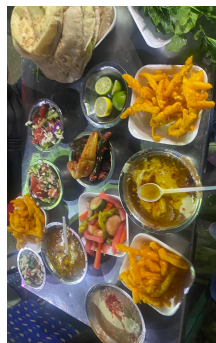
Despite the beige-turned-gray buildings, Egypt's beauty still shines through.



The country's charm isn't just found in its ancient history, but also in the welcoming, generous, and fun-loving spirit of its people. Egyptians are a lively group; their get-togethers often start around 10 p.m. and can last until 2 or 3 a.m. They are also amazing storytellers, with gatherings filled with laughter and jokes—although my Americanized sense of humor often fell flat. From what I observed, Egyptians love celebrations, going all out for holidays like Christmas or Ramadan. Streets are adorned with decorations, lights are strung between buildings, and pop-up shops brim with holiday-related items.



Food plays a central role in their gatherings. Even if you're not asked to bring food, it's customary to contribute a dish, quickly turning every event into a sort of potluck. If you're sick, new to town, or going through an important milestone, friends and family will show up with plates of their specialty dishes. Egyptians express love through food, and rightfully so—Egyptian cuisine is absolutely delicious.





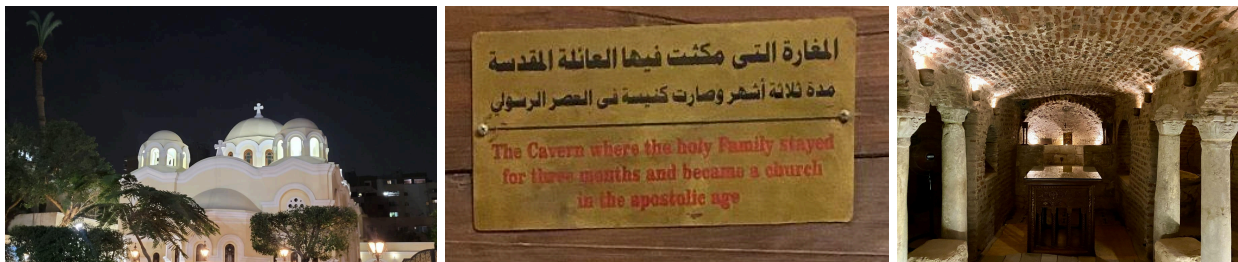
Working with BLESS also opened my eyes to social issues I hadn't realized were still so prevalent. For example, BLESS hosts seminars in rural areas to educate people about the dangers of FGM and early marriage. While I didn't focus on any one project or do fieldwork, I got to witness the administrative side of a nonprofit organization dedicated to public service. I engaged in important discussions about making their efforts more effective and encouraging people to participate in conversations that sometimes challenge traditional values. Volunteering in the office of a nonprofit, rather than meeting people face-to-face, was a unique experience. It wasn't always easy to remember that the meetings I attended were indirectly impacting thousands of lives. I had to continually remind myself that the charts I created for donor conferences and reports had a real-world effect—donors' impressions of BLESS influenced how much funding the organization received, which in turn affected how many communities they could assist. In addition to data visualizations, I also helped write and edit reports, as most of them were in English for out-of-country donors.

Although my individual contribution may have seemed small in the larger picture, Egypt left a much bigger imprint on my heart. My time there played a crucial role in my personal growth. Before my journey, I thought I was fluent in Arabic, but once I arrived, I realized I could understand it much better than I could speak it. My brain couldn't translate fast enough to keep up in conversations with non-English speakers. Living in a place where I struggled to communicate helped me develop thicker skin and learn to set boundaries when necessary. As a naturally shy people-pleaser, learning to ask for what I needed and set boundaries was a challenging but essential lesson.

Additionally, interacting with people who were disconnected from the pressures of social media and focused more on beliefs and life's simple pleasures inspired me to be more present and live freely. I also became more proud of my heritage. Egyptians take great pride in their ancient roots, reflected in statues, murals, preserved monuments, and traditional recipes passed down through generations. They showcase their history everywhere, and I found myself inspired by their deep connection to their roots.



I also grew closer to my religion, Christian Coptic Orthodoxy. Conversations with people whose spirituality had a profound impact on me encouraged my own spiritual growth. Visiting places where Jesus and the Holy Family stayed, or the Church of St. Mary in Zeitoun, where Lady Mary appeared in the 1960s, was an overwhelmingly wholesome experience.



However, my time in Cairo wasn't without its challenges. I experienced intense homesickness being thousands of miles from my family. The seven-to-eight-hour time difference didn't help, as our phone calls often consisted of one of us falling asleep while the other had just woken up. I also have a fear of cats (ailurophobia), which made life difficult given the number of stray cats on the streets. I tried to overcome my phobia before going to Cairo, but it worsened during my time there. My daily commute to the BLESS office often involved zigzagging down streets to avoid the cats. Despite this, I still consider myself to have improved, as I faced my fear every day and managed to live with it.

Overall, my Lumos travel was a transformative experience that reconnected me with my roots, faith, and humanity. It's an experience I wouldn't trade for the world.