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Another First at JCCC

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Ever since JCCC opened its doors, there have, of course, been many firsts … the first student who enrolled, the first Teacher Exchange Program, and many other wonderful new beginnings that make us who we are. Under the leadership and untiring efforts of Carolyn Kadel in the International Education Office, there was another first last fall at JCCC. The first group of five Egyptian Fulbright professionals sponsored by The Community Colleges for International Development (CCID) and the State Department arrived at JCCC to study in the Hospitality program. Mostafa el Rawi, Ahmed Mokhtar, Mohammad Awad, Karim Kamb, and Ashraf Abdelwly are the first group of working professionals from a Muslim country to go through such a program.

I thought it would be interesting to see their viewpoints now that they have been here for nearly a year. Also, I was once in their shoes and wanted to examine how my experiences coming from Pakistan many moons ago were different from theirs. Of course, in my case, I came in as a naïve young woman student, whereas these men had been working in the hospitality industry for several years. Nonetheless, I thought it would be interesting to have a candid talk with them.

**SH: Could you tell me a little bit about how the five of you were selected for this program?**

Ahmed said that there was an initial meeting arranged by Fulbright Egypt in different Egyptian cities, which was attended by large groups of professionals. At these meetings applications for this program were handed out, and they were also available online. Ashraf added that about 3,000 people applied, out of which 500 were called for an interview, and then finally 200 were selected to study in the US. Those who were fortunate enough to be selected were selected primarily due to their work experience, the degrees they had obtained from different technical and career programs, as well as, in my case and Ahmed’s, on the bachelor’s degrees we had in our field of study.

**SH: What preparations did you go through in Egypt to get ready for your study in the U.S.?**

The students indicated that they had been offered a seven-month training program in English as part of their preparation, but not everyone had to attend the entire program. Based on their prior familiarity with the English language, the students could take the TOEFL test early if they so opted. Ashraf indicated that the students were also given a five-day orientation at the Marriott Hotel in Cairo, covering such topics as the educational system, health care and visa regulations, society and culture in the U.S., and other logistical issues while studying in the U.S. Once they arrived in the U.S., they were offered another three-day orientation in Washington D.C., along with students from Brazil, Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey and Indonesia—countries that are part of this joint program between CCID and the State Department.

**SH: What was the greatest surprise after coming to the U.S.?**

Mostafa was the first to answer this question and indicated that the people were the biggest surprise. He did not expect that people would be as friendly and interested in his culture as they have been. Ashraf, on the other hand, felt that the
biggest surprise for him was that the U.S. media talks a great deal about democracy and respect for diversity, but after coming here he did not find this to be the case. Mohammad was surprised by the infrastructure and the common use of technology that is taken for granted by many in the U.S. But I think that Ahmed’s answer was the most telling. He indicated that youth in Egypt think of the U.S. as a dreamland, but one really has to struggle hard here to achieve success. The other surprise for him was the weather. As they say in Kansas, if you do not like the weather wait and it will change. Ahmed said at times he has experienced all four seasons in one day.

**SH: What did you expect the U.S. to be like, and especially Kansas?**

It seemed like I had touched a bit of a raw nerve with this question, since I got some very candid responses to this question. Ahmed did not want to come to the U.S. once he found out he was Kansas-bound, as he had heard about many interesting cities in the U.S. and wondered why he was being sent to the Midwest. Most of the students were expecting that they would be sent to touristy cities in the U.S., since they are all working in the hospitality industry. To them it was odd that their Egyptian colleagues in the IT area were being sent to Hawaii, and they, on the other hand, were being sent to Kansas. However, all of them indicated to me that the friendliness of the people, their instructors, and generally their program of study has more than made up for their initial disappointment.

**SH: How do you compare life in the U.S. with life in Egypt?**

Ashraf indicated to me that life in Egypt is far more social than here, but it is certainly more systematic, communication is used to build relationships rather than for primarily informational purposes as it is in the U.S., and Mohammad seemed to agree with him. They both felt that it was easier to get very real and honest in Egypt compared to the U.S. where people liked to stick to small talk. Mohammad feels that people in the U.S. generally focus on details in everything, whereas most Egyptians talk about the big picture. In part for these same reasons, Ahmed feels that it is harder to make friends in the U.S. than it is in Egypt, but it is also possibly because everyone stays so busy and stretched in different directions.

**SH: What has generally been your impression regarding studies in the U.S. as compared to Egypt?**

This question also evoked some very interesting responses. These professionals collectively felt that the studies in general are much easier in the U.S. than what they expected. They feel that there is also a big difference in the way instructors and students interact in the U.S. as compared to Egypt. In general there is a very lax attitude on the part of the students towards their professors – the nonverbal communication would be considered rude in Egypt, but not here. Another interesting point that these gentlemen raised was that the courses that they have taken thus far have not really addressed global issues in the classroom. Since all of them are working professionals in their industry, they were expecting an international perspective not only in their coursework but also by way of discussions.

**SH: When you talk about Egypt with your American colleagues, what is the general impression about Islam or a Muslim country?**
I was particularly interested in their response to this question given the media attention on Islam and Muslim countries. Most of them feel that their American colleagues generally do not have much idea about Islam, but once a conversation is initiated, many Americans are interested in knowing more about it. Ashraf and Ahmed have been very active in making presentations to different schools, and Ashraf, in particular, has made at least eight different presentations on Egypt and the Islamic faith. Ahmed found out quickly that Egypt is stereotyped in the minds of many Americans as the Pyramids, camels, and deserts. But the reality, according to him, is that Egypt is very cosmopolitan and most people are working professionals. There are also many historical sites besides the Pyramids and Sphinx of Giza. Egypt also offers religious tours for people of diverse faiths. Ashraf indicated that many Egyptians are aware of other faiths, but surprisingly, even though the U.S. society is quite open, people here are still unaware of the basics of Islam, as well as other international cultures and societies.

SH: Tell me something about the mentor families that you all have been assigned and your experiences with them.

Mostafa was the most vocal on this particular issue, since he has had the best experience with his host family. Rick and Elaine had been extremely kind and generous in many ways, especially by exposing Mostafa to the U.S. film industry. Ashraf expressed some concerns that in order for the mentor families and the visitors to have a mutually satisfying experience, there should be some orientation provided to the mentor families as well.

SH: Have you had a chance to travel within the U.S.?

Most of these men have travelled extensively in the U.S., visiting different cities. All of them marvel at the differences from one state to another. In certain cities, they noticed, one does not even feel that one is in the States. Some cities are more cosmopolitan than others, with good public ransportation available, and, surprisingly, there are cities where they were hard pressed to find people who spoke English.

SH: There is a new group of Egyptian students coming this fall. What advice would you give them now that you have been here for almost a year?

Mostafa felt that, above all else, the incoming students should be flexible and adaptable. He feels being flexible will make them feel more at home and also help them make friends faster. Others told me they would tell the new students to travel as much as possible within the U.S. to experience the true diversity of the U.S. Ashraf, on the other hand, feels it is very important that the incoming students should have a game plan of what they want to achieve or experience while here in the U.S. Once they have a plan in place, he feels that the students will not just have studies as their main goal, but they will be also able to experience the richness of America.

As I was finishing up the interview, these men wanted me to be sure to add that their stay at JCCC would not have been the same without the kindness and generosity of Carolyn Kadel, and her staff, Janette and Barbara. Ahmed said it best, “Carolyn has been a mother to all of us in the U.S.”