

In Kansas, International Visitors Become Friends

MANHATTAN, Kan. (April 13, 2009) — Imagine, if you can, that you are a young man from a far away place visiting the U.S. for the first time and asked to choose between spending two months in Kansas - or California.

Such a choice was offered to 23 college-age men from Pakistan who were selected to participate in “Experience America,” a short-term experiential training program Jan. 17-March 6, said Bill Hargrove, Kansas State University coordinator for the first-time educational opportunity.

“All 23 of the Pakistani student-visitors chose California, but 11 were assigned to Kansas nonetheless,” Hargrove said.

The program is funded in part by the U. S. Department of State by a grant to Agricultural Management Group, Inc., which is based in Great Bend, Kan., Hargrove said.

Hargrove serves as the director of the Kansas Center for Agricultural Resources and the Environment (KCARE)/ Kansas Water Resources Institute (KWRI) at K-State. KCARE partnered with AMG and its president John Jackson, to write the grant proposal which brought the students to Kansas.

While the young men admitted to having mixed emotions in coming to Kansas rather than California, such feelings began to dissipate as they moved into Jardine Apartments on K-State’s campus and began meeting students at Kramer Dining Center, he said.

“Like many who come to college, the food drew immediate interest,” said Hargrove, who noted comments about “the food not being spicy enough.”

“But the relationships that soon formed made visitors’ concerns evaporate, as dining with KSU students proved an enjoyable experience for all concerned,” Hargrove said.

“Having no previous experience with the U.S., the young men had made assumptions based on their perceptions from media coverage,” he said.

Meeting the young Pakistani men was a first for many on the K-State campus, in the Manhattan area and at other sites, including the State House in Topeka, Hutchinson Salt Museum, Eisenhower Presidential Library, and numerous sites in Kansas City, Wichita, Melvern and Great Bend, said Hargrove, who noted that the first-time visitors spent a week in Washington, D.C. before coming to Kansas.

Daily schedules during the program included a mix of classroom training, including English language skills, interactive sessions focusing on state and local government, community development, leadership, environmental management, and culture.

While at K-State, the student-visitors met with distinguished professors including former Kansas governor John Carlin; Daryl Buchholz, associate director of K-State Research and Extension; Yar Ebadi, dean of K-State’s Business School; and Fred Cholick, dean of the College of Agriculture and director of K-State Research and Extension.

The young men reported that “meeting and interacting with such decision-makers would not be possible in their country,” Hargrove said.

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After meeting with the students, Buchholz noted: “These young men spoke freely and openly with regard to bringing peace to their troubled area, and believed education of their people is a key to securing that peace. Their enthusiasm, desire to learn and to understand our systems of education and development were clearly evident.”

While in Kansas, the Pakistani visitors also participated in a volunteer service honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Allied Tribes Powwow; community theatre; cowboy singing, and K-State athletic events.

Attending a city council meeting and one-on-one sessions with specialists at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment also pleased the students, Hargrove said.

And, since the young men come primarily from a rural area in Pakistan, they were particularly interested in seeing community development in action in Melvern and Great Bend, he said. Local government and a well-organized volunteer corps in Melvern are improving water quality via the Kansas PRIDE Program and Healthy Ecosystems-Healthy Communities Project.

Hargrove said he was pleased with the students’ interest in community development and intent to take home ideas to improve their communities.

The fact that Kansas’ beginnings as an undeveloped frontier territory has some similarities with the Pakistani region where the students grew up helped the students make a connection with our pioneering spirit and challenges in settling the state, Hargrove said.

They also were taken with the state’s motto: Ad Astra per Aspera, which translates into “To the Stars with Difficulty,” he said.

Though having grown up in a vastly different culture, the young men adopted the motto and, during a debriefing at the American Embassy when they returned to Pakistan, were pleased when they discovered that they - rather than a Kansas native employed at the embassy — could recite the state’s motto, Hargrove said.

Several of the Pakistani student-visitors expressed an interest in attending graduate school at K-State, and many are keeping in touch with their new American friends by e-mail and social media, Hargrove said.

More information on the “Experience America” program is available by contacting Hargrove at 785-532-7419.

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K-State Research and Extension is a short name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, a program designed to generate and distribute useful knowledge for the well-being of Kansans. Supported by county, state, federal and private funds, the program has county Extension offices, experiment fields, area Extension offices and regional research centers statewide. Its headquarters is on the K-State campus in Manhattan.

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