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Study Abroad Program Prepares UNCP Student for Future Success

BY RUOYOU CHEN UNC Pembroke Aug 23, 2017



Neveen Issa studied in South Korea for part of her Study Abroad program.

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In many people's eyes, Egypt is a country full of mystery. Since Neveen Issa came to the United States, she has found herself explaining to Americans misunderstandings about her home country.

Many mistakenly think Egypt is an Arabic country like Yemen, a country made of only desert largely because of popular photos of Egyptian pyramids and the Great Sphinx of Giza. Contrary to these beliefs, only the southwestern region of Egypt is desert, and most of the country is a modern, urban society.

Furthermore, Americans are confused about Egyptians and the Muslim faith. It should be noted that Egyptians are not Muslim, and Egyptian women do not wear hijabs.

"In America, everything is opposite. For example, we greet people in different ways because in Egypt we don't call seniors with their names," said Neveen, who is a senior this fall at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

Before Neveen's family emigrated from Egypt, she studied English in her elementary school. As an Arabic-speaking Egyptian, she didn't have the chance to practice her English outside of the classroom. When she attended an American high school, she did not meet the English level requirement and needed English as a second language (ESL) course to develop her English skills before beginning standard high school course work.

After Neveen's year in ESL, it was still not easy for her to communicate with her American classmates. Being new, Neveen experienced a lonely transition to finding friends in a new country.

"It took a while to make friends," Neveen said.

And so she turned her focus to academics. Neveen focused on studying instead of social life and excelled as an honor student in high school.

Neveen attended eighth grade in New Jersey, moving to North Carolina just before her ninth grade year. She appreciates the freedom in American schools, which is different from schools in Egypt. In Egypt, students sit in the classrooms and wait for the teachers to enter.

In America, students are more aggressive, chasing after teachers and asking questions. She also feels many courses are more difficult in Egypt.

The transition in school wasn't the only surprise in store for the Egyptian transplant. Neveen was surprised when she moved to the United States from the tropical country of Egypt. Having never seen snow in person, she ran immediately into her first snow experience in New Jersey — more than 12 inches.

Neveen's older brother recently graduated from UNCP. She often visited him and came to know the campus well. She also discovered UNCP's Esther G. Maynor Honors College. Through her brother's influence, Neveen chose to enroll at UNCP in 2014, embarking on a new stage of her life in the United States. She was quickly noticed as an exceptional student.

She received the COMPASS Scholarship. The program provides \$6,000 to 27 students studying biology, biotechnology, environmental science and chemistry from their sophomore year until graduation.

Neveen is double-majoring in biology with biomedical emphasis and chemistry with pre-health professions concentration.

"I want to go to medical school. These two majors are backups to each other, and help me understand [each of] them better," Neveen said.

Though her parents hoped she would become a lawyer, a fear of public speaking pushed her to another profession. Neveen now dreams of helping people in another way, becoming a doctor, specializing in cardiology.

"There is no doubt in my mind she will be able to handle the rigors of a medical school curriculum. She constantly demonstrates her passion for helping others, stepping forward to teach her peers when they struggle with difficult concepts," said Dr. Siva Mandjiny, chair and professor of chemistry at UNC Pembroke.

In addition to studying for her double major, she will be preparing for an eight-hour medical school entrance examination this summer. She is considering Duke University or UNC Chapel Hill for medical school, both close to her family and friends in Raleigh.

After living in the United States for years, Neveen has gradually adapted to her new lifestyle. She said, "[I] still have some things I don't know, but [it's] better than [when] I first came here."

In her freshman year at UNCP, she heard about the study abroad program through the International Programs Office and became interested in going abroad to experience something different from American culture.

She wants to understand different lifestyles and conditions to better serve many different patients in her career as a physician. She not only hopes to talk to people who live in the United States, but also people from other countries.

Neveen is taking part in the study abroad program in South Korea, where she is attending University of Seoul, a well-known medical school in Asia, for one semester. She believes the advanced technology courses will help her prepare for her future career in health care.

Neveen is also interested in the opportunity to learn Korean culture. While in Korea, Neveen will travel to China, Japan and Europe, soaking up as much culture as possible.

"I like to learn different cultures," she said.

Neveen encourages others to study abroad. She believes the more diversity you experience, the more you know.

UNCP's Interim Director and Study Abroad coordinator Alex Brandt believes students who study abroad gain a distinct advantage.

"I think students who study abroad broaden their horizons through life-long learning of cross-cultural experiences," Brandt said. "Studying abroad is the opportunity to discover yourself while embracing a culture different from your own. And if you take the risk of leaving your home, then you will be better prepared to face future challenges."

Mark Milewicz, dean of the Esther G. Maynor Honors College, said Neveen is another example of how the Maynor Honors College at UNCP supports international experiences of our students.

"It is a great opportunity and privilege to support her studies here and abroad," Milewicz said. "Neeven is an outstanding member of the Maynor Honors College at UNCP and a terrific ambassador for our campus community. Her international experience will only serve to further strengthen her candidacy for graduate school."

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