Exchange is Closer to Home than You Might Think

A life-changing experience is not always what you expect it to be. When thinking of a life-changing event, your mind most likely goes to something really abstract or far away from your perception of reality – like hiking a volcano or petting a tiger in a foreign country. In actuality, a life-changing experience can happen anytime and anywhere; and it definitely doesn’t have to happen outside your home country to impact and change your life. This is what I realized this past summer.

In this past July of 2017, I had the opportunity to participate in the Saudi Young Leaders Exchange Program (SYLEP) as a Cultural Ambassador. The program itself consisted of three weeks: an introduction/workshop week in Northwest DC, a city-immersion week in one of three locations (Austin, TX; Blacksburg, VA; or Pittsburgh, PA [depending on the one of three groups each participant is divided into]), and a wrap-up and closing week in Arlington, VA (that included a pitch competition and ceremony). At first, the title of Cultural Ambassador confused me a little, but as the days and weeks went on, I truly began to understand my role and came into my own. I can’t deny that it was difficult; the balance of being a participant of the program whilst being a lending hand and a friend to the Saudi students was a bit challenging at times, but because of the strength and reliability of the amazing staff leaders around me, I knew I could trust them with any questions I needed answered. And, regardless of the small predicaments that arose, I can assure any and all that the SYLEP 2017 participants and I had so much fun – especially my group that went to Blacksburg, VA.
During the first week of the program, we participated in countless workshops regarding social entrepreneurship and pitching practice. This was an amazing experience because it taught me – an English and Linguistics major – so much about the business world. I’ll have to admit – before the program, I was kind of closed-minded to the thought of starting a business. This is because I was completely foreign to the concept, and was frightened by the word alone, as I thought that it would require a sort of expertise in the field and a lot of work. I was right about the amount of work, as the ImpactHub workshops in DC taught me that being a social entrepreneur can be very tiresome, but the work is not as scary as it seems (one definitely doesn’t have to be a business major to start one), and helping to directly solve a problem that affects a community can be very rewarding to watch.

Though I thoroughly enjoyed this first week, the second week as part of SYLEP 2017 is what made it life-changing for me. During this second week, we split into our city-immersion groups, and I found myself constantly surrounded by 11 students from Saudi Arabia from at least 8:00 a.m. to 12 a.m. (sometimes even earlier/ later than this). I woke up and had breakfast with the Saudis, went to workshops and site visits with them, had lunch and more classes with them – and because we were stuck in a small college town with little to do in the afternoons – I also ate dinner and hung out with them at night. Now, this may sound a bit overwhelming to the average person, but our group worked together so well, and I know that this is because of the quality individuals I was gracious enough to have had the chance of meeting and spending my time with. During this week, we not only took personality assessments to assess our strengths and abilities in relationship with others in a working environment (as social entrepreneurs), but we also took some of these personality quizzes for fun; and because we spent so much time with each other, I think that we were able to get to know each other more than any of the other two groups that
were based in big cities with a lot of activities to do. We constantly talked about culture and politics in both America and Saudi, and we even shared our personal life experiences in our countries. We valued each other’s opinions, personalities, and strengths; and because we were constantly around each other, we were forced to quickly solve and extinguish any issues that arose within the group. Though we only spent three weeks together in total, I can definitely say that I made life-long friends with the Saudis from my Blacksburg, VA group. They not only stood out to me as kind and awesome Saudis, but as wonderful and beautiful individuals, in general, with countless talents and so much potential.

The last week in Arlington, VA was a very emotional one – as it included our pitch event, closing ceremony, and closing dinner. As much as I am a “non-crier”, I couldn’t help but shed a few tears as the friends I had so quickly grown close to were already leaving. Thank goodness for social media, because I love hearing from and seeing these guys online, every day! The incredible opportunity and experience of being a Cultural Ambassador for SYLEP is difficult to put into words, but it was life-changing beyond measure. This is the kind of experience I wish upon everyone. I am so thankful to Legacy International for providing me the opportunity to join this program, because after interacting and building relationships with the staff members and Saudis, I do not know what I’d do without them. Inshallah (if God wills it), I hope that I will be able to visit them in KSA, someday!