

2019, Amy Do, Nikki Hinshaw, & Benji Fitten – Cultural Ambassador Reflections

Amy Do

“I’ve decided that this is gonna be my SYLEP journal because I am pretty sure there’s gonna be a lot to write about. We finished a day full of learning about what we’re supposed to be doing and now we’re waiting to be summoned to go to the airport. Nikki and Benji are both fantastic- all three of us are united in having no idea what’s about to happen. I’m so excited and grateful for how this trip has started.”

That’s what I wrote in my white notebook on June 25th, 2019. It’s three weeks later, and the program ended. Right now I’m sitting in BWI eating a granola bar, waiting for my flight to start boarding.

My name is Amy Do- I was one of three Youth Cultural Ambassadors for the SYLEP 2019 program. Benji Fitten and Nikki Hinshaw were the other two. We are now dear friends.

When I first got accepted to be a part of this program, I read blog posts from years past and wasn’t really sure what to make of them. Now that I’m on the other side, I understand why: It is impossible to accurately describe how buckwild SYLEP is.

On paper, the schedule is jam-packed with workshops and site visits. Off paper, it’s the most intense and rewarding experience I’ve ever had on both an intercultural and personal level.

Get up at 7, downstairs by 8. Breakfast, then meetings and workshops from 9-12, and then a site visit from 1-3pm. Back for a little bit, and then out until the early hours talking, talking, talking.

You hear a lot in the news about Saudi Arabia and the middle east in general. The tone of media coverage is almost unilaterally demonizing and ‘other’ing. I understood objectively that this was wrong, but knowing what Saudi Arabians *aren’t* isn’t the same as knowing what they *are*.

A couple of days after everyone arrived in DC, our WhatsApp group pinged saying that there was going to be a dialogue in the lobby about cultural differences in gender relations. Soon enough there were 20 of us in a circle all having conversations about what it meant to have meaningful connections with other people, and how society places expectations on how relationships are formed and how they function.

The participants had differing opinions, but still addressed one another with respect. I’d seen so many debates in my Social studies classrooms devolve into gleeful shouting matches- people just happy to have a reason to yell. This wasn’t like that. It was an incredible exchange of opinions and lived experiences even within the Saudi participants- many from the Western province had never met anyone from the East, and vice versa. It was like when I told Benji that I’d never met anyone from Texas before.

Here's an excerpt from the end of my SYLEP journal:

"Tomorrow is the last day. When we pulled into the Homewood suites driveway, Ahmed said, 'wow. This feels so familiar. This feels like home. And I was shocked to feel the same way. How do I succinctly say how glad I am to have met everyone?"

Because of SYLEP, I now know someone whose uncle casually owns a hawk ranch. I learned to sit in the discomfort of differing opinions- you don't need to agree with what's being said to be a good listener. I became a chain-drinker of complimentary hotel Bigelow Tea. I learned that not everyone eats apple cores. That lactose intolerance is a) common and b) a spectrum. I've seen Big Bird in real life, and did facemasks in the middle of rural Virginia. I learned the lyrics to Chicken Fried, and rediscovered my love of Hey There Delilah. I learned that there are over 36 different types of dates (ranging from the familiar Majhool to the delightfully named Thawee). I've said sentences like, "Yallah habibi, insallah we will get to dinner on time." I have made countless professional connections. I have 2 new friends triangulated across the country, and 32 more, halfway across the world.

I never thought that I would be a confidante, or someone that people came to when they needed help. This program has made me realize that I can be that person. It's amazing to have changed someone's life- a privilege to have my life changed by the conversations I've had, connections I've made, and skills I've gained. I'm so happy to have been a Cultural Ambassador, and hope that this encourages people to consider applying in the future. SYLEP is a rewarding test of time management, personal growth, and interpersonal engagement.

Nikki Hinshaw

Being the sappy, sentimental international exchange enthusiast that I am, I introduced myself to an unfamiliar group of 32 Saudi Arabian young adults with this statement: "I don't think you all realize just how much of an impact you are going to make on the people you meet here." At the end of the program, while saying goodbye to that same, now-familiar group, I stood by my original assessment, but the events of the previous three weeks warranted a significant edit: "I don't think I realized just how much of an impact you'd make on *me*."

I can confidently say that serving as one of the three U.S. Cultural Ambassadors for the Saudi Young Leaders Exchange Program (SYLEP) this summer was one of the most challenging but rewarding experiences of my life. I don't think there are enough words to capture just how incredible this program was, but I'll do my best to try.

First, one of the circumstances of SYLEP that made the experience that much more impactful was the amazing staff I had the pleasure of working with. The Legacy team provided me with countless opportunities for personal and professional growth and served as such positive representatives of global leaders. I was also fortunate to navigate this unique role alongside fellow Cultural Ambassadors Benji and Amy, two of the most intelligent, thoughtful, and hilarious humans I've ever met.

Together, we participated in SYLEP's daily programming, which ranged from volunteer activities, to leadership development workshops, to project planning sessions, and cultural excursions. Then, at the day's end, we'd join the participants for late-night civil, political discussions in the hotel lobby, Georgetown shopping trips, or take additional time to explore. While I sometimes felt as though I could not possibly stay up late any more, the participants' enthusiasm to learn and grow never failed to renew my energy.

The most rewarding moments of SYLEP often came from those late nights and long bus rides spent sharing insights into each other's lives, passions, faiths, and beliefs. I learned more about Saudi and Muslim culture in those three weeks than I ever could have imagined. For a country and faith that is so stigmatized and misrepresented in the media and politics, it was so impactful to be able to learn from these participants, and now be able to carry that knowledge into future conversations I have with friends, family, and colleagues.

I learned that the answer to a lot of questions about Saudi is, "It depends on the region." I discovered that my throat does not have the capacity to formulate many of the sounds necessary to do the Arabic language justice, but that it didn't keep the SYLEPers from doing their best to help me try. Also, that dust storms are called haboobs in both Saudi and Arizona, and us desert-dwellers can get really competitive when comparing the hottest summer temperatures we'd endured. I learned that when things don't go according to plan, such as a baseball game getting postponed due to a storm, sometimes all you can do is laugh it off, and take selfies in the rain with a group of people you never thought you'd become so close with in such a short period of time. The SYLEP crew taught me so many things, but most importantly, how to cherish those once-in-a-lifetime experiences and memories with people you'll never forget.

While I was very fortunate to develop strong personal connections with the larger group of participants, the cultural immersion week in Pittsburgh allowed me to form a deep and special bond with my team of 12, lovingly called the Penguins. I was learning so much from them that it was easy to gloss over the possibility that I was making a similar impact on their lives. However, I earned the privilege of engaging in deep conversations with participants about their struggles and successes, allowing me to discover my strength in showing compassion and empathy in mentorship. I can't imagine that I taught them even just a fraction of what they taught me, but I'm so grateful to have had the opportunity to offer whatever support or knowledge I could.

Overall, I'm beyond thankful for the friendships, laughs, and cultural exchanges this program brought into my life. I miss my SYLEP family so much already, but I'm excited to follow these amazing humans as they all create positive change in Saudi. I can't wait for the day where I can point to the SYLEP alum who became the first female Minister of Health in Saudi, the mastermind behind a life-changing health literacy campaign, or a motivational speaker who inspires MS patients with her strength and perseverance, and know I played a role, no matter how small, in their journey.

Benji Fitten

Hi, my name is Benji Fitten, and I was one of the three cultural ambassadors who participated in the Saudi Youth Leadership Exchange Program (SYLEP) for this past year. I think the beauty of

the SYLEP program is the fact that there isn't too much information on what happens during the program. I had stumbled upon the blog posts like the one I'm writing now, and I still couldn't really make heads or tails of what happens within the program itself. Now, since I'm the one writing about this experience, I'd like to take some time to showcase SYLEP and aspects I enjoyed.

Firstly, I think I'll try and explain why I chose to apply to this program. Throughout my college career, I was deeply interested in immigration and the cross-section that it had with cultural exchange. For many of the Saudis who participated in the program, this was their first time in America. That really allowed me to see their first impressions of the West when compared to the East. Because of SYLEP, I've managed to really see the mindset of youth within Saudi Arabia, their aspirations and how they see the future. I'm also interested in the Middle East, its politics, and its people and this program seemed like the way for me to get a personal experience of the three all at once. I've studied Modern Standard Arabic for two years and they gave me some pointers on where I could improve. I also can't forget the slang I was taught unique to their dialect.

What exactly is SYLEP? Something to note is that the SYLEP program is not wholly a cultural exchange program. Instead, it is a multifaceted program which uses culture exchange as a medium to also learn about leadership styles, community and civil service, as well as ways to direct personal growth. At the time of me writing this, it's been about a week after the program, and I still find myself still thinking about concepts and modes of dialogue which I learned from my time here. The topics which are covered range from practical in the workplace-like grant writing and project design, to personal growth such as interpersonal conflict resolution and leadership styles.

SYLEP is an intensive three-week program. Intensive makes it sound intimidating, but in reality, the program is simply packed with unique experiences. Within three weeks, you manage to attend a plethora of workshops and speakers not to mention community service within the DC area and the city immersion. With all of these activities, it may seem as if three weeks isn't enough, yet during my time here it felt as if time had slowed down. Everybody participating in this program was essentially thrown into the deep end, so personal connections blossomed among everyone. What I appreciated from the program were the dialogues which I shared with my Saudi counterparts inside and outside the program. Their frankness and honesty with every topic allowed for a real conversation to happen on many levels.

In all, the SYLEP program is a three-week program in which you make fast friends and learn much about yourself and others. To all who have stumbled across this program like me, the experience is well worth it. The program expanded my global understanding and interact with peers from halfway across the world.