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DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER

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Part 2



Tying Up Loose Ends: Our Final Impressions of Kuwait

Despite having comfortably settled into Kuwaiti life by the middle of April, neither of us were quite sure what to expect during the remainder of our stay, except of course, the weather, which had already reached a scorching 115 degrees Fahrenheit. Because the end of the AUK academic year was quickly approaching, the both of us were busy helping prepare for multiple academic and cultural activities.

The Raft Race

One of these activities was the annual Raft Race, which brought together both students and staff from AUK (including Ed) in both building the raft and participating in the actual event. We initially thought that the raft would be made up of inflatable rubber, but turned out to be horribly wrong, as it was constructed entirely of empty oil barrels (this is Kuwait, after all)! The Race was held at the Aqua Park located near the famous Kuwait Towers, and consisted of a 400-meter course. The AUK teams, which included students, staff and faculty, fared well despite the lack of practice and the difficulty we faced in building our raft. The overall experience was remarkably enjoyable; sentiments of unity and team spirit prevailed, providing an emotional high that some of the students had clearly never experienced, as organized sports opportunities are not as popular or well coordinated in Kuwait as they are in the United States.

Social Awareness Week

In the beginning of May, AUK participated in its inaugural Social Awareness Week, organized by Hema Mohan '06, a Fulbright Fellow and one of Dartmouth's first interns at AUK, who is volunteering her time at the University. The week's programs were designed to increase awareness in the AUK community of social justice and equality issues at the local, national and global levels. The programs involved with Social Awareness Week included a Hunger Banquet (the first banquet of this sort that most AUK students had ever participated in), a speech by Dr. Hilal Al-Sayer, founder of Kuwait's first children's hospice, a clothing drive, and a Social Awareness Film Festival. The films shown included a short but powerful and revealing documentary on Bangladeshi street workers in Kuwait, a documentary about cheap labor and its connections to WalMart, the film Blood Diamond, and the documentary An Inconvenient Truth. The issues addressed in these films and other programs of this week seemed to open eyes around the AUK community concerning the many socioeconomic injustices both around the world and within the Kuwaiti community itself. Moreover, it provided outlets for those who desired to make a change in their own society, something many students appeared eager to do. It was great being a part of such a burgeoning and successful process, and even more so to see many of the students and staff respond with a passion and vigor for change.

Our Final Days in the Desert

With a couple weeks remaining in the internship, Nick decided to move to the Office of Student Affairs after completing his projects from Admission, in order to help Ed and rest of the office prepare for the third annual AUK Awards Night. It was great having the opportunity to spend time in another department. Spending most of our time in one administrative department, it was easy to assume that “this is how things at AUK function.” Working together and sharing experiences there, both of us came to a better understanding of what a struggle it is to keep a nascent institution running. Building infrastructure to make a school run smoothly involves more than simply laying the groundwork, creating the office and positions, and hiring employees. Reliable infrastructures are built over time and grow as the people involved become more comfortable and familiar with the needs of the community in which they are working. It was exciting and stimulating to work in a place where these things are still being constructed.

The last week of our internship was filled with activity, both in and out of the office. We traveled with our colleagues from Student Life to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates for four days. Our view of Dubai was quite different from that of Kuwait. We both agreed that Dubai seemed to lack a certain “Arab-ness” that was present in Kuwait; as we saw it, Dubai was the Las Vegas of the Middle East. Enormous skyscrapers, indoor ski slopes, and giant mall complexes were only a few of the new and glamorous attractions that Dubai had to offer. A few of us were even able to attend the Aerosmith concert on our last night in Dubai (their first appearance in the Middle East!), after spending an extremely humid afternoon on the Jumeirah Beach, catching our last few rays of the blazing desert sun.

Returning to Kuwait, we had to immediately help to put the finishing touches on the aforementioned Awards Night, which recognized student for their academic, athletic, occupational and volunteer achievements and efforts for the 2006-2007 academic year. We witnessed the work, involvement, and most importantly, flexibility that such a ceremony entails, and the overall result left us both with a satisfied feeling of helping to accomplish such a large and at times daunting task.

Parting Thoughts

For both of us, the internship was a deeply fulfilling experience because it let us see how people on the other side of world interact with foreigners and with each other. Despite the somewhat rigid rules that dictate social interactions, people in Kuwait manage not just to survive but also to thrive. During our time there, we were lucky enough to observe the concern and push for change by young people first-hand when many AUK students reacted instantly to news that some degree programs at AUK had not been licensed by the Kuwait Ministry of Higher Education. This controversy highlighted the students’ concern and dedication regarding the future of AUK and the university’s legitimacy in the eyes of the Kuwaiti people as the first private liberal arts institution of higher education in Kuwait. Students at AUK seem to have created a space for themselves that is neither fully Kuwaiti nor fully non-Kuwaiti, forming a fascinating dynamic that influenced the way we experienced life at the university.

In a way, by not expecting historic or life-changing events as part of our agenda (such as witnessing Kuwaiti women being given the right to vote, as some of our predecessors have), we were able to take in much more of the strange and wonderful blend of culture and language that exists in Kuwait. Our time in Kuwait left us both hoping to return to the country in the future – the experience was not only pleasurable, but extremely enlightening as well.