

A Cultural Exchange

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I remember stepping off the plane and seeing unfamiliar characters on every sign I walked past and wandering down the winding hallways in an attempt to make it to immigration. It was the summer after my sophomore year, I had received an internship to be an English refugee teacher in Amman Jordan. I worked with refugees hailing from so many different places. I had students from countries like Yemen, Syria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. I swapped my usual “Good Morning” for “Sabah El Kheir” and swapped toast with jam for za’atar and cucumber. What I took away was more than I could ever give during my time in Amman, Jordan. I sat in a classroom of students and was able to teach them the predicate and subject of sentences and what looks best on a resume, but the knowledge and life lessons they instilled in me go further and cannot be confined to a loose-leaf page or the four corners of a screen. The members in my community showed me how much peace and love can be shared through families of different creeds and what it means to truly love your neighbor. I spent countless hours with the lady upstairs making meals for the elders who were participating in Ramadan even though she was Christian, she still poured into others around her even though they worshiped different beliefs. The hospitality and kindness she showed me were infectious; she would always say, “We Jordanians love new visitors,” and I truly felt it. As a Black woman I did not always feel a sense of belonging in certain places in the United States, so this feeling was new for me. I was never left confused or weary about whether I belonged because whether translating certain phrases for me or inviting me to family weddings they treated me as if I was their long time friend.

As I sat in the classroom with my students, we would swap stories of our home countries and tell of all the food we like to eat, the memories we held dear to us and the family members we had waiting there for us. I remember during a break a Sudanese woman taught me how to braid my hair because I had never learned as a child, her hands skillfully weaved through my

head and her hands felt familiar because my mother would do the same. I was amazed at how the feeling of home could wash over me, even though I was many miles away. I was able to find home in unfamiliar faces and learn so much from so many different people.

Coming back to Emory was a delight, because I was overjoyed at all the stories I was able to tell my friends. My friends sat around the table as I cooked Mansaf, Jordanian's country dish, a delicious lamb with rice and yogurt and I loudly recalled what my neighbors instructed me to do while in Jordan. Their words lived through me and guided me to make the dish as best as I could remember. I found myself practicing the art of hospitality, and helping fellow students when in need of small items such as detergent or paper towels or even cooking for my neighbors on occasion. While in Jordan I was a part of a panel with the US Embassy where we discussed the water crisis in Jordan, and I found my point of view to be widened and I brought new views to classroom discussions. As a black student I know how it feels to be unheard, so I felt it was necessary for as many points of views and feelings to be said/heard even in conversations/spaces they may not be a part of. I brought this energy into my humanitarian work as well through Emory SHINE, where I continued to teach refugees and had felt more confident relating to/ speaking and teaching people who do not speak the same language or come from the same country. I experienced an exchange of culture while in Jordan and I brought back so many life lessons and skills in which I share with my peers, professors and friends to this day. My time in Jordan broadened my horizons and taught me so much and I was able to bring a lot of what I had earned right back into my community and helped me foster a wider more worldly environment for myself and those around me.