

## Walking the Walk Goes Global

“I’ve never met a Jew before. No wait, you’re the second Jew I’ve met—I spoke to one in Washington D.C. the other day,” said one of the participants. I was shocked, although I didn’t show it through my facial expressions. I just kept smiling. That’s what the international students repeatedly told us. Americans always smile. Perhaps because they were clearly tourists, or maybe the culture in America is truly that much different than the ways of the twelve other countries from which these students originate. So why do Americans smile so much? I couldn’t tell you.

In an effort to strengthen relations with various other countries, the American government funds English language classes abroad. Originally, the initiative was made to improve relations with Middle Eastern countries, however the project has expanded to include nations from all ends of the globe. High schools from Mauritania, Uruguay, Guatemala, Egypt, Vietnam, South Africa, Cambodia, Pakistan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Jordan, and Kyrgyzstan sent their two most accomplished students—chosen from a rigorous selection process—to participate in a three week trip to the United States of America. Expressing an interest in educating these international youth on the nature of religion in America, the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia was asked to lead a one-day interactive and informative session on the interfaith experience and pluralism. To many of these students, coming from communities dominated by their own religion, the idea of pluralism was a completely novel idea. For some, it was truly foreign—both figuratively and literally. Nevertheless, these incredibly intelligent students embraced the Interfaith Center’s lessons passionately and almost automatically. Despite our racial, ethnic, religious, and national differences, we all seemed to agree on one common idea—the importance for universal respect and acceptance among our diverse world.

The night before the event, part of the Interfaith Center’s staff met the international students at the rooftop lounge of Harrison College House on the University of Pennsylvania’s campus. Each pair of students from their respective countries was given 5-10 minutes to introduce themselves and their countries—in English, a challenge for some. Through song, dance, and rehearsed speeches, the students educated the Interfaith Center representatives on the population and size of their countries; languages spoken; major religions practiced; their country’s flag; major cities; famous sites food, music, and clothing; a special object brought from home, and any other interesting facts known. The students more than successfully communicated in their non-native language through incredibly impressive presentations, remembering the size of their populations to the exact number—as in “My country is home to two million, five thousand, three hundred and *five* people.” I’m not sure which was more remarkable: their nearly flawless command of the English language, or their precise memories. That night was just an introduction to the excitement that would ensue the next morning.

When the students arrived at the Drexel Intercultural Center on the morning of Friday, July 8<sup>th</sup>, their excitement immediately pervaded the building. When

instructed to write their names on nametags, the response was astonishing. Some of the participants could not fathom what they were supposed to do with the strange piece of paper handed to them. How do I put it on? Which part do I write on—the white part or the scrap paper of already peeled nametags. If I peel it off, it will stick? I took a moment to stand aside with another intern, as we reflected on how different life must be for these students, compared to the experiences we've had growing up in America.

The day began with a workshop led by Nicole Diroff a staff member of the Interfaith Center. Along with introducing the agenda for the day and explaining the importance of respect and understanding for the session, she credited Louisa Jacquinto, an Interfaith Center intern, for working persistently to ensure the success of the day's events. After participating in a few icebreaker activities to break from our comfortable and instinctive seating choices next to our friends, the room was divided into various groups. Each group was given a pad of paper and a pen, as Nicole instructed the participants to write down any questions had about other religions. Next, the groups traded pads of paper and marked questions that were found to be meaningful, while correcting those questions that seemed offensive. Each group then chose one question to share with the room. Although it didn't seem possible, the energy level and enthusiasm for interfaith learning increased exponentially after this activity.

Next, we walked to a dining hall on Penn's campus, where the students enjoyed the American food that they often raved about when describing their experience thus far. After being assigned to sit on the bus with someone who shares the same favorite animal, we began our tours of the religious spaces. The first stop was at Mishkan Shalom, a reconstructionist synagogue. To most of these international students, it was as if they had entered an alternate universe. Pointing to the Hebrew letters that spelled out the name of the synagogue, one student asked me if the words were written in Arabic. Never in my life had I needed to explain what the word "Hebrew" meant. Try explaining a foreign and mysterious language to a student who speaks English as a second, if not third or fourth language. Inside the synagogue a student leader and the youth director from Mishkan Shalom allowed the students to try on a tallis and a kippah. The students fearlessly jumped at the opportunity, taking multiple pictures of themselves in the traditional Jewish prayer coverings. Next, the students were shown the inside of a Torah—another word with which many of these students were unfamiliar, as they asked multiple questions to the leaders. The student leader chanted a commonly known prayer to the wide-eyed group, as more hands extended in the air with more questions. However, based on the fast-paced nature of the day, all the questions could not be answered. It was time to move on to Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church.

Walking to the bus, the international students were still buzzing with questions about Judaism. Imagine suddenly being exposed to a religion—a belief system—that you'd barely ever even heard of. How could these curious, intellectual students not have questions? Before I even knew what was happening, Jenn Mirel, another co-

intern, and I were asked to stand at the front of the bus with a microphone to answer questions. Ranging from “can you sing Hava Nagila?” to “do you believe in an afterlife” to political questions about Israel and inquiries about the Holocaust because “the internet can’t be trusted”, we found ourselves swarmed with questions that, as Jewish representatives, we were responsible for answering. From explaining the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem, to giving a crash course on the World Wars, Jenn and I managed to provide as much knowledge as we could during our bus ride to the participants. I can honestly say it was a situation that I never had anticipated my involvement—let alone leadership.

Quickly, the gears were shifted as we entered the beautiful Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. Sitting in the pews, student leaders explained the beliefs and practices of Christianity. Again, many of the international students and their chaperones had multiple questions. The group was given a chance to explore the amazing room of worship, seeing a sneak peak of a secret back room for the clergy and even having the chance to hear the organ played. Again, the students were engrossed in their learning. I took a moment to admire the stained glass windows, as a participant from Yemen explained to me that every house in his hometown is built with such beautiful decoration. Amid a Church, a Muslim man was able to share some of his life with a Jewish girl. I thought to myself, that’s exactly the purpose of interfaith learning. To conclude the visit, we joined hands in a circle as the Reverend led a Christian prayer, which many of the Christian participants identified and chanted with her.

Next, we bussed to the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship mosque. Fortunate to have just missed the rain, we stood outside of the mosque admiring the intricate Arabic writing, which included all 99 names of Allah in beautiful gold scripture. Upon entering the mosque, as some of the participants separated from the group to pray, we were all instructed to remove our shoes. The group was given the chance to speak to two religious leaders in the mosque—both of whom were previously Christian converts, asking basic questions and learning about the unique attributes of that particular mosque compared to others. Personally, I was astonished to find such a beautiful, yet hidden and unknown, building in my own hometown that I thought I knew inside out. The most meaningful experience for me was the chance to see the room of worship. All of the women were handed a head covering before entering. Scanning the room helplessly, I found a Muslim friend to help me properly cover my hair. From that moment I understood what it must have felt like for the Muslim and Christian students to wear a tallis and a kippah in the synagogue. It was an exciting role reversal. The mosque was incredibly hospitable, offering us snacks and cold drinks at the end of our visit, while we continued to ask questions about Islam. As I scanned the room, I was pleased to see the many Muslim students proudly listening to the Imam speak. The purpose of the day seemed to have been fulfilled: the students gained a stronger connection to their own religions, while also being exposed to diversity in an educational manner unavailable to them in their home countries.

Reflecting on the bus about the three visits of the day, I noted that each religious leader communicated the same messages: religion should be peaceful and accepting of others, and the main foundation of practicing religion is to improve oneself to become a better person.

Finally, we returned to the Drexel Intercultural Center for a wrap up session on interfaith understanding and pluralism. Nicole led an activity involving a fable about a giraffe and an elephant, which students volunteered to act out, leaving us with difficult questions to discuss about how to embrace differences without losing our own identities. Reuniting with our groups from the morning, we discussed different elements of pluralism and the ways in which it applies to our lives. In my group, we even had a mini vocabulary lesson, as I explained the meaning of “criticism” and “self-criticism” to a spunky, yet incredibly serious learner from Egypt. The topic was complex and I was a little worried about the ability of these students to understand the language and the meaning of pluralism, but my doubts were pushed aside by the discussion held in my group. Although their accents were thick, the ideas that these students expressed were one hundred percent on target.

Leaving the students with one last game intended to send a message of encouraging the students to be open to interfaith diversity, the meaningful day concluded on a positive note. Saying our goodbyes, many of the students asked if they could add us on Facebook, send us emails, or take pictures with us. Their program leader later explained to us that pictures were a huge deal—only taken after a truly profound experience. So with the flash of multiple cameras, our goal was accomplished, and the Interfaith staff left the building with hugs and waving gestures of appreciation. From what the international students reported to us, the Interfaith Center provided them with a day of important learning. And as always, the students helped us, the teachers, to understand a little more of the incredibly diverse world in which we live. Looking back, I smile—confirming the students’ observations about American behavior. I couldn’t have asked for a better day.