Lives Enriched by Living Abroad

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Lives enriched by living abroad

Two Linfield alumni found a new way of looking at life after living and working in Japan for a year. It’s been nearly a decade since their experience, but Dave and Anastasia (Sims) Dillon, both ’89, agree their lives have been enriched by the priceless connections they made while serving as assistant English teachers at high schools in Hitachi-Ota, Japan, through the Japan Exchange Teaching program in 1995.

“There’s a great connection between living abroad and the value of life-long learning that Linfield works so diligently to instill in its students,” said Dave, a Linfield College trustee and executive vice president of the Oregon Farm Bureau.

Even before their marriage in 1990, Dave and Anastasia discussed the importance of living abroad. So they jumped at the opportunity with JET. Dave resigned from his position as press and community liaison for former U.S. Sen. Bob Packwood and Anastasia took a leave of absence from her post as assistant director of financial aid at Linfield.

Although Dave said he expected to learn new things, make new friends and have new experiences in Japan, he did not anticipate the change of perspective of financial aid at Linfield.

As a Linfield student, Anastasia took four years of Japanese and studied abroad in Japan twice. Dave had little Japanese language training prior to their departure, but carefully observed the cues around him in Japan. “Paying attention to how things are done is as important as vocabulary,” he said. “Often, what is not said, but what is intimated or gestured, is more important than the actual words that are said.”

Anastasia often draws upon skills she acquired in Japan in her current job as associate director of student financial services at Lewis and Clark College, where she occasionally works with students preparing to study abroad and international students studying in Portland.

“I can relate to the confusion international students sometimes experience,” she said. “They can come to me for help.”

The Dillons returned to Japan in 2003 with their son, Nathan, 7, and visited Tsutomu (Ben) Kusama, a Kanto Gakuin University student whom they hosted at Linfield in 1993. Ben and his wife, Megumi, have a three-year-old daughter, whom they refer to as Nathan’s Japanese sister. Both Dave and Anastasia agree travel will remain a priority for their family.

“We’re happily infected with the travel bug,” Anastasia said. “Once you’ve done something that’s outside your regular comfort zone, it makes other barriers look smaller.”

— Laura Davis

The personal face of Islam

Several students, including Deeksha Swakumar ’07, were inspired to choose research themes relating to women in Islam.

“She was very engaging because she truly believed what she spoke about Islam,” said Swakumar, an international student originally from India, whose parents now reside in the United Arab Emirates. “My personal discussions and meetings with her were invaluable.”

Lindsey Kish ’05, a comparative religious studies and psychology major, was fascinated by the concept of five-times-daily prayer, which Chishti likened to a spiritual roll call for Muslims. Kish said she believes Islam is radicalized and misunderstood in America.

“She was able to show Islam to be not only a valid and versatile tradition, but also one that, in its principles, if not always in its practice, holds women in the highest esteem,” Kish said.

For Chishti, each discussion, whether at Linfield or in the community, was inspiring and gratifying in many ways. “I think our conversations have stirred imaginations and brought ideas (community members) haven’t thought of,” she said. “I’m going home very satisfied that the objective of bringing Islam and Christianity together has been achieved.”

Chishti is a prominent scholar in the international community. She is a project director for the Higher Education Commission of the government of Pakistan, president of the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council and a member of the Executive Board of the Islamic Philosophical Association. She has served as a fellow at Harvard and Oxford universities, and has been a visiting professor at Villanova University.

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Saadah Khawar Khan Chishti, visiting Islamic scholar from Pakistan, spent much of her semester at Linfield engaged in conversations with students. She is pictured here with Emily Cline ’06, left, and Kameen Haven ’08.