2005

The Personal Face of Islam

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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 Anastacia (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 Anastacia 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 Anastacia 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 that had the greatest impact on him.

“Being in another culture and away from familiar things at home gave me a chance to see the U.S. that had the greatest impact on him.

Anastacia discussed the importance of living abroad.

As a Linfield student, Anastacia 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.”

Anastacia 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, in Kamakura, Japan, in 2003. Tsutomu (Ben) Kusama from the left, and their son Nathan, front row, left, visited Dave and Anastacia (Sims) Dillon, both ’89, third and fourth from the left, and their son Nathan, front row, left, visited friends in Kanagawa, Japan, in 2003. Tsutomu (Ben) Kusama Yamaguchi, second from left, was a Kanto Gakuin University student whom they hosted at Linfield in 1993.

The personal face of Islam

Saadah Khawar Khan Chishti helped put a personal face on Islam this fall.

Chishti, a visiting Islamic scholar from Pakistan, captivated Linfield community members when she served as a scholar-in-residence through the Understanding Contemporary Islam (UCI) program, jointly sponsored by the American University of Beirut in Lebanon and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars in Washington, D.C. She took part in classes and spoke on a variety of topics, both at Linfield and in the McMinnville community.

Clothed in flowing, traditional shalwar-kameez-dupattah/chadar suits, Chishti spoke earnestly and often with students, faculty and community members, dispelling stereotypes about Islam. Her soft-spoken demeanor enhanced her ability to relate ties between Islam and Christianity and to explain her religion in a way that sparked interest and dialogue in the community. She emphasized that Islam, an Abrahamic tradition, believes in dialogue and co-existence.

“We may practice our own religions as a family of God, but live in peace, harmony and good will,” she said.

Linfield students welcomed the exposure, according to Linda Olds, professor of psychology. After Olds’ gender and spirituality class, in which Chishti focused on female spirituality and Rabia, an Islamic female saint, students lingered to continue the discussion.

“It is rare in modern culture to be in the presence of someone who so richly embodies and articulates with passion and clarity the spiritual path in any tradition,” Olds said.

Several students, including Deeksha Svakumar ’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 Svakumar, an international student originally from India, whose parents now reside in the United Arab Emirates.

“My personal discussions and meet-ings with her were invaluable.”

Linfield 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 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 high-est 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 thinking 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. Chishti holds degrees from Cornell University, Government College Lahore and the American University of Beirut.

Shaik Imsail, director of International Programs at Linfield, said Chishti provided a forum for dialogue as she discussed the many facets of Islam as a faith and as a political phenomenon.

“At a time when the world is mired in fear, violence, distrust and misconceptions, we are fortunate to have this opportunity to engage in conversation about faces and cultures that are different from ours,” Imsail said. “Dr. Chishti gave us a glimpse of some of the misconceptions of Islam and allowed our community to ask questions, to explore and to comprehend.”

– Laura Davis