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Honors Study Abroad Egypt 2011

May 6, 2011

Twelve honors students traveled to Egypt this past January, and while visiting the pyramids, seeing the mummies, and taking a boat ride on the Nile were all on the itinerary for the first-of-its-kind study abroad trip to Egypt, little did these students know that they were on the eve of Egypt's participation in protests that would soon grip several countries in the region. As they returned home and saw newly familiar streets and squares packed with protesters, they could apply the lessons they learned over in Egypt during classes and tours led by Dr. Krista Wiegand.

The 12 students, Dr. Wiegand, and her husband, Michael Jordan, spent almost two weeks exploring Cairo, working on a service project, camping in the desert, and learning about Egyptian Politics. While in Cairo, they stayed in a local hotel, dined on local cuisine and volunteered at Health and Hope Oasis, a holistic treatment center for children who have been diagnosed with cancer. They also immersed themselves in the culture.

"My favorite experience was our service experience in Wadi al-Natroun, a small town a couple hours north of Cairo, where we worked side by side and shared several meals with local Egyptians, working to clear land for a playground for children with cancer," said Dr. Wiegand. "It was immensely rewarding not only to volunteer for such a good cause, but to spend time in the fresh air away from crowded Cairo in a non-touristy environment, talking to our Egyptian hosts about their lives under the now defunct Mubarak regime."

For some of the students, getting to know the locals was one of the highlights of the trip. "One thing I loved about being in Egypt was talking and being with the local Egyptians," said Accounting major Stephen Mayfield. "I enjoyed talking to them about their everyday life and anything that came up in conversation. During the protests, I still kept in contact with a few people I met when I was in Egypt."

While the students were in Egypt for 12 days, their experience was part of a three credit-hour course available as political science credit or as an elective. Studying in Egypt provided an experience far different from what one would have studying in a Western European country. Egypt, while ahead for its region, is still an industrializing country. By not staying in the tourist destinations, these students were able to experience a different way of life that made some rethink their priorities upon returning to the U.S.

"While we were in Egypt I felt that the problems we had in the United States were quite minuscule," said Music major Michael Palmese. "Voter fraud and government corruption was at an unimaginable level and nothing compared to what we accuse our elected officials of here. On top of this was the constant anxiety and nervousness among the populace of living in a police state."

History major Kristen Grantham agreed, "Once the protests started, it made complete and total sense as to why the citizens were rebelling against the Mubarak regime: they were tired of being afraid of their government and couldn't bear the thought of Mubarak's son taking over and beginning a 'dynasty.'"

"Every day I was reminded how blessed I am to live in such an awesome nation that tries to take care of its citizens," Grantham said. "The poverty and corruption in Egyptian society was apparent, and gave me compassion for these individuals who struggle with it every day. Traveling abroad was eye opening, and my return to Georgia Southern has made me more aware of those around me and thankful for the opportunities I have every day."

Being in Egypt right before the protests provided the students with a unique perspective as they began the new semester at Georgia Southern, and many of them watched the protests not simply as an activity happening somewhere else in the world but as a world-changing event that also affected them on a personal level.

"I was so excited for the protests in Egypt, especially since I was just there a week before," said Grantham. "Being able to experience the environment Egyptians lived in allowed me to understand their actions and want to support them. I followed the news constantly and was ecstatic when news about Mubarak stepping down was announced."

Political Science major Molly Laughlin agreed, saying it was because of the people that she felt connected to the protests. "The humility and humanity of the Egyptian people affected me the most because so many times we wrongly characterize people who live in that region of the world," she said. "The people are so resilient and friendly, so it made it very difficult to watch the protests because I feared that the violence would get out of control. However, the protests were necessary so that the people have the opportunity to experience the same types of political and social rights we have in the U.S."

"What impacted me the most about the trip was how surreal everything was in Egypt when I was there and when the protests occurred," said Mayfield. "It seemed to hit close to home when the protest were occurring only blocks away from where the group walked weeks before. I felt connected with the Egyptian people when the protests were happening."

In April, a couple months after returning from the trip, three students – Kelsey Decker (Journalism), Kristen Grantham and James Zimmer-Dauphinee (Anthropology and Mathematics) – presented their papers at the statewide Middle East Student Symposium in Milledgeville, Georgia. Dr. Wiegand, who was the symposium's keynote speaker, said she was really pleased at their contribution.

"Presenting at the conference was a great experience for them and many others told me how much they enjoyed hearing from the students about their recent experiences in Egypt since they had such a unique perspective," she said.

As part of the class all of the students were required to research some aspect of Egyptian politics, and the impact the tumult in a place these students had recently been had a noticeable effect on their work.

"All of the students who studied abroad were much more interested in the turn of events than anyone else and certainly more than they probably would have been if they had not just been there," Dr. Wiegand said. "The chance of such political change happening when they were writing research papers about Egyptian politics is extraordinary, and it was clear in the papers that real world events influenced their thoughts about Egyptian politics."

Article by Kelsey Decker and Katie Brookins

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Katherine Mincey wins Goldwater Scholarship

May 6, 2011

Two Honors students were honored by the Barry M. Goldwater Foundation this past spring. Biology major Katherine Mincey won a Scholarship from the Barry M. Goldwater Foundation for her research into the relationship between plants and insects, and Chemistry major Stephen Crooke was recognized with an Honorable Mention by the foundation.

The Barry M. Goldwater Foundation provides scholarships to undergraduate students who are developing promising research in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). The Foundation made 275 awards to sophomores and juniors from the United States out of a pool of 1,095 applicants. The scholarship awards up to \$7,500 over up to two years to cover the cost of tuition, fees, books, and room and board.

Bret Danilowicz, Dean of the Allen E. Paulson College of Science and Technology, said, "Katherine and Stephen's awards also reflect the quality of the instruction and mentoring they have received from their supervisors and other faculty in the College. Given that these awards are the most prestigious honor an undergraduate science, technology, engineering or math student can receive, we cannot help but be proud and inspired by their achievements."

Mincey, a 1906 Scholar who is majoring in biology, is researching whether plants can be used to draw potentially harmful metals from the soil without having a negative effect on the ecosystem.

"My current research is to determine the effects of the nickel levels in certain plants on caterpillars' growth and reproduction. The purpose of this research is to determine if using these plants as a method to clean up heavy metal pollution is an effective yet safe technique. The caterpillars are the first step in the food chain and we want to make sure that the nickel will not be passed to other species in the environment," Mincey said.

Last summer participated in a National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates at the University of Virginia. On campus, she works closely with Dr. Bill Irby. She plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Evolutionary Biology and research and teach in a university.

Crooke is a Paulson Scholar and his research is focusing on a more efficient and cost effective way of creating certain chemical compounds in synthetic sponges that have the same properties as sea sponges. His research will be used in the fight against cancer.

"The natural products that have been isolated have displayed a promising amount of activity in biological testing, and my research lab will eventually be sending our synthetic "natural" products to the National Cancer Institute for testing as anti-cancer treatments," Crooke explains.

He works closely with Dr. Christine Whitlock and Dr. Michele McGibony and already has a published one paper as a lead author in Molbank, a peer reviewed journal. He intends to pursue his Ph.D. in Biochemistry and work in the pharmaceutical field. Crooke says Georgia Southern's strong support of research by undergraduates has been key to his success. "I feel that my close relationships with my advisers, Dr. Michele McGibony and Dr. Christine Whitlock, helped in progressing my research through the years. I feel that this close relationship with my professors here at Georgia Southern is a major advantage that I had when applying for the Goldwater Scholarship which students at larger universities might not have enjoyed."

Mincey agrees, "All of the professors here genuinely care about how the students perform and encourage them to take advantage of the opportunities that arise. Their hard work and dedication is seen inside and outside of the classroom. "For me, the guidance and support of Dr. Risa Cohen and my mentor Dr. William Irby, as well as many other professors, have been influential in my accomplishments and were important in my application for the Goldwater scholarship."

The Goldwater Scholarship Campus Committee this year consisted of John DiCesare, Chemistry; Bob Cook, Computer Science; Alan Harvey, Biology; and Jim Braselton, Mathematics. Both students were supported through the Goldwater application process by the honors staff. The University Honors Program is the campus

clearinghouse for nationally competitive scholarships and fellowships and has supported 18 students who have received national scholarships and fellowships since 2006.

"I am delighted that we could nominate two strong students for the Goldwater Scholarship this year," said Dr. Steven Engel, Director of the University Honors Program. "And I am even more delighted that both of them received recognition. Katherine and Stephen both have promising careers as scientists and we were very impressed with their applications."

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Palmese Wins Phi Kappa Phi Grant

May 6, 2011

University Honors student Michael Palmese was recently awarded the prestigious and nationally competitive Phi Kappa Phi Study Abroad Grant. The award helped fund his participation in the fourth annual Music International Studies experience with the Music Department at Georgia Southern. Palmese, a senior whose involvement on campus and dedication to academic pursuits gained him the significant recognition, was among twenty-nine other students to participate in the program during the summer of 2011.

The trip consisted of two components: a concert performance tour of Eastern Europe followed by a residency portion in which each student was able to select a course of interest. While traveling through Europe, Palmese and his peers visited such cities as Vienna, Prague, and Budapest as they performed in prestigious concert halls across the continent, went on sightseeing daytrips, and participated in academic residencies. Through their travels the students were able to experience both the cultural and historical aspects of music.

During the group's time in Leipzig, Palmese was able to visit many historical sites including the Leipzig Conservatoire, founded by German composer and pianist Felix Mendelssohn, and the gravesite of famous composer Johann Sebastian Bach during a time when the city was alive with a celebratory Bach festival. "Being able to visit sites like the Thomaskirche and the personal residences of composers like Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Mahler was a somewhat surreal experience. Seeing and experiencing the spaces in which these composers lived and worked gave a completely different dimension to their lives and work."

Of the many performances of the tour, Palmese especially enjoyed the group's final performance in the Church of Simon and Judah in the Czech city of Prague. Surrounded by the beautiful aesthetics of the baroque church and performing for an especially large crowd, Palmese says this was a time on the trip when the momentous nature of the entire experience became particularly apparent. "While every performance we did had its own special memories attached to it, Prague certainly felt to me like a culmination of the entire tour portion of the trip. The beautiful church that we performed in, as well as the incredible audience turnout, seemed to be a fitting send-off for the students that would soon return to the United States."

Each year the honor society of Phi Kappa Phi awards forty-five Study Abroad Grants to undergraduate students. These one thousand dollar grants are aimed to support students' desire to gain knowledge and experience through studying abroad; undergraduates from across the nation compete for the available awards. All applications are reviewed according to Phi Kappa Phi's high standards for its award recipients, each being "evaluated based on numerous factors, including academic recognition and awards, campus and community involvement, leadership experiences, and quality and scope of proposed program."

Of the only forty-five undergraduates awarded the Phi Kappa Phi Study Abroad Grants for the 2011 academic year, Michael Palmese was chosen as a recipient of the prestigious award to help fund his study and performance experience in Europe. Palmese first applied for funding through the University Honors Program's Study Abroad Award, and after being awarded this initial support, his application was forwarded to Phi Kappa Phi.

Palmese is a senior Composition major who plans to pursue a degree in Musicology while in graduate school. As a student at Georgia Southern, Palmese plays the clarinet in the Georgia Southern University Symphonic Wind Ensemble, is an active member of Phi Mu Alpha, an organization focused on the advancement of music in America, and has also served on the Student Advisory Board of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. These involvements paired with his focus on maintaining a high level of scholastic achievement made Palmese a strong candidate for the Phi Kappa Phi Study Abroad Grant.

Doctor Carolyn Bryan, Director of Music International Studies at Georgia Southern University, met Michael as a freshman and taught his chosen residency course while in Europe. "Michael is persistent and thorough. He's obviously highly intelligent and put together a great application for the PKP scholarship. Michael had not traveled internationally prior to this year, and he's been on an amazing adventure with an Honor's Program trip to Egypt last January and our program this summer as well as a study program in California the previous summer."

The Music International Study European Concert Tour and Residency was Palmese's second study abroad experience of 2011 after also participating in the Honors Alternative Break Trip to Cairo, Egypt in January. Palmese believes that the opportunities to study abroad he's been afforded both through trips organized by the University Honors Program as well as through the financial support for outside experiences has helped him to gain a more comprehensive global perspective and to embrace opportunities.

"When you study abroad, the memories you make will continually accrete in value as you idealize the experience," said Palmese. "There is so much more out there than just the state of Georgia or the United States and being able to see vastly different cultures and people is a truly humbling experience. I think we are quite lucky that Georgia Southern actively pushes study abroad programs and is committed to helping students garner funding."

Article by Kelsey Keane

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