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Exchange students explore Islamic culture in Queens

By Jennifer Park

A cosmopolitan group of 24 young people sat in a circle Friday on the floor of Dar Al Dawah mosque in Astoria, intently listening to Dr. Ahmed Jamil speak about Arabs and Muslims in the United States while sipping cans of Lipton iced tea. Some were in T-shirts and shorts and baseball caps and had never set foot in a mosque before, while others were fully covered in flowing fabrics and had been raised as Muslim since birth.

Jamil said "99.9 percent of Muslims here in America are mainstream Muslims, not extreme."

The youths, hailing from Morocco, Germany, Tunisia, and the United States, were involved in a two-week-long annual international exchange program sponsored by Hostelling International-USA, the largest network of hostels in America. Hostelling International is a non-profit organization that has more than 5,000 hostels in over 60 countries, according to its Web site. The purpose of the program is to increase cultural awareness and break down cultural stereotypes. The theme of the program is "Building a Culture of Peace."

"This is a very good experience where participants can share their experiences and really learn how to be true ambassadors and gain firsthand knowledge about what's going on around the world," said Rami Nuseir, president and founder of the American Mideast Leadership Network. Nuseir started the network in 2003 to empower Arab-American youth and enhance the image of the United States in the Middle East.

Three women and three men, ages 19-25, were selected from each of the four nations based on an application and interview, according to one of the participants, Branden Lansing, 23, of Ogden, Utah. The program was funded by grants from both government and private organizations, according to Nuseir.

The group visited Astoria for a day to see an example of an Arab community in New York. AMLN hosted the youths during their visit where they attended a prayer observance in the mosque, followed by a speech and Q&A session with Jamil, the mosque's president. The discussion emphasized that Islam was not just a religion but a way of life.

"Islam can be seen as a big umbrella that covers everyone and everything," Jamil said.

The mosque's president "explained the real image of Islam - as a way of life more than anything else - really well," said Kenzal Charr, 21, from Marrakech, Morocco, who was on his first trip to the United States. "America is a very diversified country, which is a positive thing, because different people get to know each other, overcome their differences, and accept them."

It marked the first time Lansing had been at a Muslim prayer service in a mosque. "It was a new experience, and it's something I'm glad I did," he said.

"There's so much anti-American sentiment in the media now...our mission is to show that Americans as people, not as a government, are pro-peace and supportive of human rights and good relationships with the Middle East," Nuseir said.

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