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Learning

from the June 28, 2005 edition



AMBASSADORS: Abdulaziz of Kuwait (l.) and Sharihan, a Palestinian, toured Washington at the end of their year in America. MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF

Muslim-US diplomacy - one teen at a time

The US government sponsors a student exchange that brings young people from Muslim nations to America. Here's how Ruba, an Iraqi, spent the school year in Falmouth, Mass.

By **Stacy A. Teicher** | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

FALMOUTH, MASS. — Sometimes diplomacy is as simple as a teenager's smile. In the halls of Falmouth Academy on Massachusetts' Cape Cod, the face of Iraq is Ruba - unveiled and unabashed as she gives out hugs and high-fives.

"I love answering questions," she says as she nears the end of her year here as a high school junior. "Someone asked if I have a refrigerator. They always ask me why I'm so normal - that's the best question ever!"

Along with 10 boys from Iraq and some 400 other high-schoolers from predominantly Muslim countries, Ruba has been studying in the United States through a program the State Department launched in the 2002-03 school year, in

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response to the fissures of 9/11. It's one of the modest steps by governments and educators to create a new tide of young ambassadors.

Many connections take the form of letters, e-mails, and joint projects online. As a token of friendship with counterparts in Afghanistan and Iraq, American classrooms have raised money and sent everything from school supplies to candy. But students old enough to travel find that meeting face to face is the quickest way to make stereotypes crumble.

So far, the flow has been largely in one direction - to the US. The State Department spent \$11 million this fiscal year on scholarships, and wants \$20 million to bring 600 high-schoolers here this fall. The hope is that when the students go home, they'll spread a better image of America, perhaps even acting upon the democratic ideals they've been exposed to.

"Teenagers rise to the challenge - the notion that they are the successor generation and that in their hands lies the future of their countries," says Bob Persiko, chief of the youth programs division at the State Department. "That may sound overblown, but it doesn't to a person who is 15. They can say, 'Hey, I wasn't part of the old regime ... so for me it's a fresh start.' "

The visitors tend to embrace the American spirit of volunteerism, Mr. Persiko says. Consider these examples from last year's crop of students, posted on a website for alumni of the program, known as Youth Exchange and Study (YES):

- A Pakistani student visited a hospital when he was in the US, taking candy and fruit to patients and wishing them "a merry Christmas and a very happy New Year from the whole Muslim world and from all the people of Pakistan."
- A Palestinian and a Lebanese student offered after-school Arabic classes during their year in Albuquerque, N.M.
- A Lebanese exchange student took this idea back to his own high school - an elected student council.

"Education is a crucial part of American public diplomacy," says Louis Cristillo, a lecturer in international studies at Columbia University's Teachers College in New York. "Unfortunately, public diplomacy in the last decade or two has fallen a bit by the wayside in terms of youth from the Arab and Muslim world in particular. And that's worked both ways."

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In the 1990s, US exchanges focused on teens in the former Soviet Union, Persiko says. That program continues and counts more than 14,000 alumni. After 9/11, Congress asked the State Department to build on that model in Muslim areas.

To try to measure the program's effect, the State Department surveys students and hosts about cross-cultural understanding, and it checks in with alumni to assess their influence back home via careers and community service.

Ruba's role as ambassador

Ruba sat for two exams and an interview before becoming the only girl in the group representing Iraq this year. She says many of her friends thought she was crazy to want to come here, but her parents let her make the decision.

Having participated in an online video exchange between Baghdad and a high school in Connecticut, and having seen "Boston Public" on TV, she was expecting a large urban school. What she got was a small school tucked into the woods. But she's felt welcome at Falmouth Academy, an experienced host of exchange students.

Not until January, when Ruba had come to despise snow, did she really start missing home. She was also worried about her family in Baghdad, who have since moved to the United Arab Emirates (her last name is withheld for her security, at the State Department's request).

The school schedule seems light to her, compared with six days a week in Iraq. "At home we do a lot more memorization. But here we do a lot more thinking. I'm glad I experienced both," she says, sitting outside after school and fidgeting with the buckles running down the leg of her jeans.

"I dress the same at home as I dress here," she says in answer to the very common question about whether she covers her head. In Baghdad, Muslims have a choice, she says, and many girls choose not to. "I don't see anything wrong with a cover - it's a sign of faith. For me, I believe I have faith in my heart."

Ruba relishes her role as ambassador and has fielded questions at community forums and at the middle school where her host father teaches. "It's amazing how quickly she got into the spirit of this place," says headmaster Bruce Buxton. "It must have been only a few months before she was organizing lessons on Arabic and the culture of the Middle East."

But Ruba believes she's made a difference one person at a time, too. When she told a classmate that Islam is a religion of peace, he argued back about its connection to terrorism. "That really surprised me. I said, 'Well, that's your view,' " and he ended up acknowledging he didn't really know much about Islam, she says. "Then I talked with him and convinced him."



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Falmouth student Eva Schultis says she expected to see more of a cultural difference when Ruba arrived, "but it's not awkward at all." During a discussion on a class camping trip, she recalls Ruba asking if they remembered the panic people felt here after 9/11. They all nodded, Eva says, "and she said, 'It's like that in Iraq every day.'... Ruba's given us a lot of perspective."

She expects to do that in reverse as she settles in with her family in U.A.E. this summer. "There are people in the Middle East that don't like the American government, so they think bad of the American people." But the two are not the same, she says - and that's the message she'll share.

A two-way 'exchange'?

So far, most programs that have sprung up with students from the Middle East aren't true "exchanges," because not many American families are eager to send their students. That's beginning to change, though. The International Education and Resource Network, with offices in New York and more than 100 countries, recently started sending US students to Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan.

Though most visitors are received with affection, as Ruba was, students sometimes have less welcoming experiences. One YES student placed in the Midwest was told by the principal that she couldn't wear her head scarf, Persiko recalls. The school reversed its decision after hearing from the Justice Department, and "the student learned the law is there to protect minorities."

"These programs are designed to send a message that democracy is good ... but [visitors] get to see some of the bad and the ugly," says Eric Herzig, a political scientist at the University of Nevada, Reno. "They are not so tightly controlled that the message is one of propaganda."

• *For more information on YES, see www.ayusa.org or call 1-800-727-2590.*

Can't meet in person? E-mail helps link up Iraqi and US students.

For most Iraqi children, correspondence is the closest they'll get to making friends in America.

Tamara Quinn gives hundreds of students that opportunity as director of the School Partners Program, part of the US-based nonprofit group Spirit of America (www.spiritofamerica.net). This year's pilot phase involves 13 US schools and 17 in Basra, Sulaymaniyah, and Baghdad.

"Contact with children their own age [is better] than somebody coming and preaching to them what democracy is all about," says Ms. Quinn, who attended an American school for girls in Baghdad and moved to the US in 1973. "They need to be versed in democracy and its value, and human rights and the rights of the individual.... If we don't teach it,

believe me, there are other sides that are teaching otherwise."

Before talk turns to democracy, though, the kids have other things to discuss, like soccer. And in e-mails between Peter Berg's sixth-graders at Prairie Crossing Charter School in Grayslake, Ill., and a mixed-grade group in Basra, there was this urgent request from an 8-year-old Iraqi: "I have problem with my oldest brother, when I want to watch the TV ... he tern it on the sport channel or the news, for those who have face such thing ... send me your tips, don't make me wait long please."

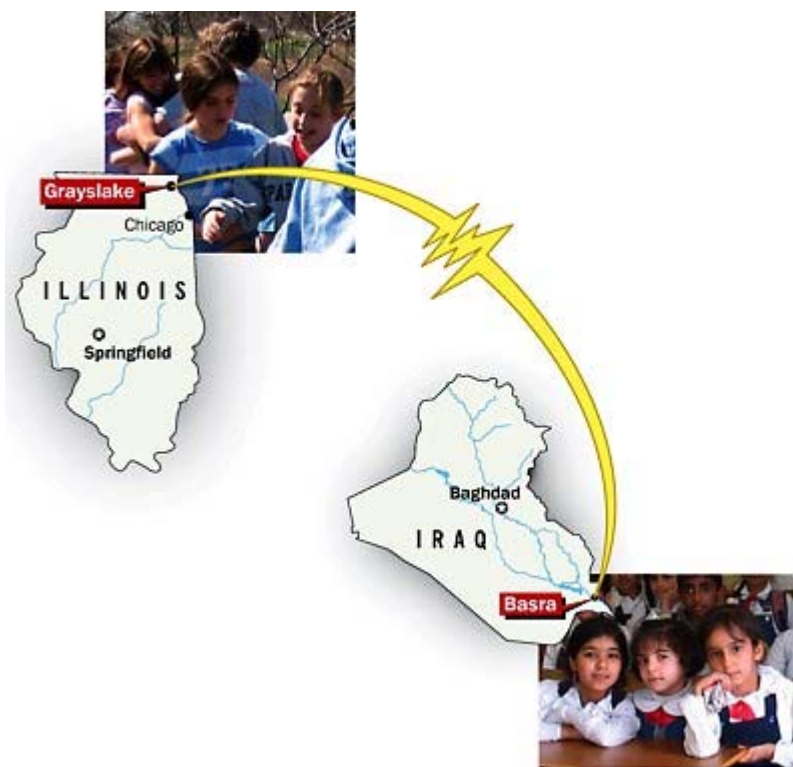
"I was surprised by how much they already knew about us," says Casey Shoultz during a phone interview with several students from Grayslake. "A lot of them said they wanted to have friends from the US.... I was really happy about that. I thought they wouldn't ... be as outgoing as they were."

Because of power outages and logistical issues in Iraq, they have exchanged only a few rounds of e-mails and photos. But Quinn expects the pace to pick up as donors supply computers in Iraq.

So far there's been more talk of common ground than of differences, but the Iraqis "talked about how girls and boys do different traditional activities," says Rachel Boraca.

For Mr. Berg, an added benefit is a class more interested in their lessons. "One of the things we've studied about ancient civilizations is how the landscape shapes the culture, and the students are starting to think about, 'Well, what's the landscape and climate like in Iraq, and how does it shape how they live?' "

Quinn acknowledges that it will be hard for messages about democracy to take root in Iraq if basic needs aren't met. Yet small steps are important, says teacher Ahooed al-Fadhly, supervisor of the Basra exchange project. "This is new for us," she says over a choppy phone line. "It's a very big challenge, and [it needs] to start with the young people."



PHOTOS: PETER BERG (TOP), AHOODED ABBAS (BOTTOM); DESIGN: RICH CLABAUGH - STAFF




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