

In Pursuit of Knowledge

STUDENTS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST
FACE UNIQUE CHALLENGES IN EUGENE By Daemion Lee

It is Sunday afternoon and Adel Al-jadani is relaxed in shorts and a T-shirt, sitting on a blanket in his Eugene apartment. Two of his three babies are sprawled on the floor near him, gurgling and cooing. The other is asleep in a pink-and-white cradle in the corner.

This school term, Adel Al-jadani is staying home with the kids. He came to the U.S. from Saudi Arabia with his wife Asma Al-jadani to study at the UO nearly two years ago, but when Asma Al-jadani had triplets last November, everything changed.

Now, Adel Al-jadani is the primary caregiver for the infants, while Asma Al-jadani finishes up her studies at the American English Institute (AEI), the UO's language and integration school.

When one of the infants on the floor starts to complain, Adel Al-jadani expertly juggles babies and puts the complainer in the cradle for her nap. Asma Al-jadani, dressed in a dark-blue shirt and a pink hijab, sits nearby, watching her husband with approval. "Our babies, you know, they help us," she says with a smile. "One sleeps, two are awake."

The husband staying home is not a typical arrangement, even in the U.S., but it is especially not the case in Saudi Arabia. Strongly enforced gender roles there mean that women are usually the ones at home — only 18 percent of women worked outside the home in Saudi Arabia in 2012, according to the United Nations.

But for this young couple living a long way from their family, it was the best solution.

Thanks to the University of Oregon, Eugene has the largest population of international students in the state. More than 4,000 were enrolled at the UO and Lane Community College in the fall of 2014, according to the Institute for International Education.

Students from China have driven that trend, but students from the Middle East are a growing part of that population. In fall of 2014, Saudi Arabians were the second-largest international student population at the UO and the largest at LCC, along with groups of Iranians, Yemenis and others, according to data from the respective schools.

The Middle East has turned into a political buzzword, but for students from that part of the world who come to Eugene, they must embrace the experience while dealing with the challenges of living in a foreign culture thousands of miles from home.

First Steps

Martine Wigham, the international SEVIS (Student Exchange and Visitor Information System) coordinator at AEI, helps integrate international students into campus life, and she has worked with international students for over 17 years. Wigham says family is a high priority in many cultures in the Middle East — more so than in mainstream American culture. That means students sometimes have to adjust their expectations, especially in the classroom.

Wigham explains that if an older brother calls, a student from the Middle East would most likely answer it in the



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

THE AL-JADANI FAMILY

middle of class. "He calls me, I have to pick up," she says about the average student's thought process.

Students come to AEI to learn English before going on to enroll in degree programs at the UO or other institutions, meaning the AEI also helps with cultural adjustment and learning about academic and cultural expectations in an American classroom.

Ibrahim Hamide, the owner of Cafe Soriah, says he has sympathy for students from the Middle East — he used to be one. He came to Eugene from Palestine as a UO student in 1969.

"It's the first time they're not getting babysat by their families," he says. "New culture, new everything."

Hamide says some of the adjustments they must make are ones any young person goes through. "That's the age when a lot of people are still shy," he says, explaining that the students are figuring out their personal strengths.

Culture Shift

For students like Wedad Al-lahji, who moved to Eugene two years ago from Saudi Arabia with her husband and three kids, American universities can be full of new and trying experiences. She is earning a masters degree from UO in applied linguistics and plans to pursue a Ph.D.

In Saudi Arabia, Al-lahji says, women spend most of their time inside, unless there is an urgent need to go into town, so her first experience navigating campus was a challenge. "I remember my department was in Agate [Hall]," she says. "It was far away; I didn't know how to get there. For me it was scary, it was tiring, but I was happy because it was a totally new experience for me."

She says one of her most challenging experiences was

last year when she was asked, as part of her graduate coursework, to teach a series of lessons to a classroom of English-language learners. The class was filled with students from Saudi Arabia, and they were male.

"We don't teach men at all," Al-lahji says about women back home. "I was on the spot."

But she did her best, and she says she was able to win her students' respect. "I think they themselves were proud of me because I was standing and speaking the way the Americans present," she says.

Education is segregated by gender in Saudi Arabia, but women are well-represented in colleges and universities — according to a 2012 report by CNN, women outnumber men in higher education in two-thirds of the countries in the Middle East. However, this education does not necessarily translate to jobs, the report continues — women rarely move on to participate in the work force there.

Conformity

Male students in Eugene sometimes have to deal with more subtle kinds of challenges. Abdulmohsin Abusaq, a Saudi student studying at AEI, says he loves Eugene — the damp weather, the friendly people, the college-town environment filled with dissenting voices.

"I like diversity, the difference of opinions. I like this," Abusaq says. He recalls an organized debate between his group, the Arab Student Union, and the UO Alliance of Happy Atheists. They had interesting conversations, he says, about religion, ethnicity and discrimination.

But adapting to an environment like this can be a challenging transition. "Sometimes people here, they have to be like Americans," Abusaq says about the pressure he