

It's a small world after all...

International week brings diverse cultures together

BY MARIANO CASTILLO
The Battalion

Bonjour, hola, salaams, guten tag, aloha ... howdy is not the only form of greeting found on campus. Over 100 countries are represented at Texas A&M. Each bringing not only a different dialect, but also different foods and different perspectives.

To celebrate the diversity on campus, international week is dedicated to highlighting the differences and expanding awareness of other cultures at A&M. This marks the 20th anniversary of the event organized by the International Student Association. The opening ceremony will take place in the MSC Flagroom at 11:30 a.m., and the celebrations will come to a close with a party and award ceremony on Friday.

Mohamed Al-Saikhan, a graduate student and representative of the Saudi Student House, said the opportunity to share and learn customs and traditions of other countries is something to indulge in.

"There is definitely diversity [at A&M]," Al-Saikhan said. "But I don't think [American students] take advantage of it."

In the long-standing debate as to whether students here receive an adequate international education, Al-Saikhan said he agrees with most international students that cultural awareness has come a long way but still has a long way to go.

"[In Saudi Arabia] we are taught to know about other countries from the beginning of our schooling — their population, products, exports and imports," Al-Saikhan said. "What percentage of Americans try to learn [about other countries]? Not much."

In the eyes of many international students, International Week is a door to much more than the food they serve at the buffet and the costumes they show during the cultural display.

Tiffany Huang, a senior managing information systems major, said this week is not just for Americans, but for all the cultures to mix.

"Each club at I-week should have more interaction together," she said.

Al-Saikhan said cities in Saudi Arabia are comparable to metropolises in the United States.

"Saudi Arabia is not the vast desert that most people imagine," Al-Saikhan said. "This is an example of one of the most common misconceptions of other countries. It is not a small country. As you travel across the country, different subcultures are clearly identified, much like the distinct groups of people in the U.S."

Francisco Perez, president of the Guatemalan Student Association and a senior marketing management major, said as a Latin-American in Texas, the number one stereotype formed is that all Hispanics are Mexican. Perez said many Latin students are from South and Central America.



MICHAEL WAGENER/THE BATTALION

"Everyone thinks we are from Mexico," he said. "Every country has its unique cultural differences."

Currently, 11 Latin-American countries have active clubs on campus, including Peru, Colombia and Nicaragua.

Wikrom Jaruphongs, vice-president of the Thai Student Association and a graduate assistant, said misconceptions are also formed about Thailand and neighboring Southeast Asian nations.

"People assume that because Thailand is a small country, then its people have small ambitions," Jaruphongs said.

Jaruphongs said that to the contrary, it is high goals that attract many Thais to America to get a more complete higher education and to master the English language in hopes of getting ahead in Thailand. Thailand is known as "The Land of Smile," which coincidentally overlaps with Aggield being known as "The Friendliest Campus."

Similar to when a child refuses to try a new food because it looks different (and ends up loving it), exposure to new cultures can open up new passions.

David Spatzier, an Italian at A&M and a senior agricultural journalism major, said International Week is a great opportunity to find something to like about other countries.

Spatzier said the food and the music are some of the best parts of the Italian culture. He said Italians are also very passionate about sports, especially soccer, which is something many cultures can relate to.

Another cultural aspect that sparks interest among students is history. Huang said China has a rich history that makes it unique.

"The Chinese have a longer history than most cultures," she said. "Each dynasty was different and is like a new story."

Perez said in other countries, even the way people treat each other is slightly different. He said compared to Americans, Guatemalans (and for the most part, other Latins) show more openness to each other.

"The respect of personal relationships are more close between family and friends alike," he said.

Al-Saikhan said one of the most varied cultural aspects around the world is religion. He said in America, religion does not play as big a role as in other countries, such as Saudi Arabia.

"All life is based on religion," Al-Saikhan said. "We judge people, from A to Z, how we interact — everything including how to buy and sell, how to eat and how to wear your clothes."

The International Student Association is aiming for International Week 1999 to spread culture through activities such as the buffet and talent show.

Huang said many hours of work have been put into the festivities. "Organization is great this year," she said. "Everybody is doing their best," she said.

Perez said he expects a high turnout this year.

"It's the 20th anniversary; it's for people to celebrate; it's become a tradition," he said.

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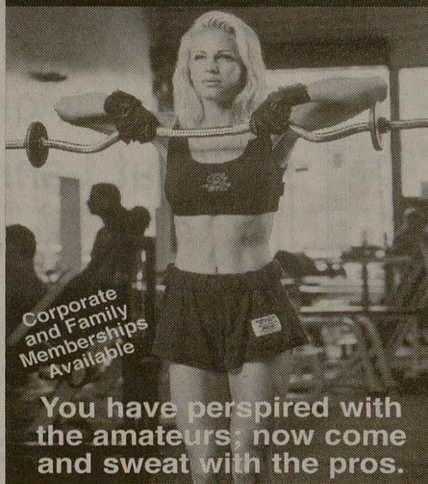
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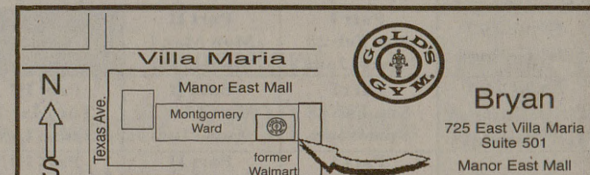
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