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A window on the Arab world

Northeastern student Matt Cournoyer visits the home of businessman Dr. Abdul Rahman Al-Zamil while on a fellowship in Saudi Arabia. *Courtesy photo.*

July 1, 2010

As part of a unique fellowship in Saudi Arabia, Northeastern junior Matt Cournoyer conversed with high-ranking government officials and wealthy businessmen, toured universities, and observed the local customs of Saudi life on everything from religion to business.

The fellowship's goal was to introduce American students to all aspects of Saudi culture, and Cournoyer said the **experiential learning** opportunity left him much wiser, inspired and globally enlightened.

Cournoyer was selected as one of nine current college students — all Model Arab League standouts at their respective universities — to participate in the 10-day fellowship. The trip, June 7 to 16, was organized by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, an American nonprofit that strives to improve Americans' knowledge and understanding of Arab culture. It was cosponsored by the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the U.S.A. and the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education.

In his group's guided travels across the country, Cournoyer had some memorable experiences. He shared tea and coffee with Dr. Abdul Rahman Al-Zamil, a Saudi billionaire. He met Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, longtime director of the Saudi Arabian intelligence agency, who shared his views on Saudi Arabian history and the Kingdom's foreign affairs policies. And he heard John Sfakianakis, a leading economist and group general manager at Banque Saudi Fransi, discuss the oil industry's place in Saudi Arabia's economic future.

The fellowship also included visits to several universities and museums showcasing the country's history, scientific advancements, and oil drilling and production process.

"It strengthened my interest and appreciation for society in the Middle East," said Cournoyer, a **political science** and **international affairs** double major.

Cournoyer said he discovered there are more opportunities for women than is commonly believed in the West, and the fellowship strengthened his understanding of how closely religion is integrated into every element of Saudi life.

"What we saw was much more dynamic and had much more depth to it than the perception that the only thing going on over there is exporting oil," he said.

Cournoyer, who said he is eager to return one day to learn more about the culture, has been selected as the secretary-general of the 2011 National Model Arab League Conference in March in Washington, D.C.

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