

EDUCATION

EXCHANGE STUDENTS EXPLORE FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

By AnnElise Makin

Two young ambassadors were taking their task quite seriously. Eyyub Israfilov and Ali Damirzade, both 15 years old, and both 10th-grade students, from Azerbaijan's capital Baku, had traveled to Arizona with a group of 16 fellow students through the Youth Leadership Program (YLP) of the American Councils for International Education.



Eyyub & Ali with their Mesa family

Eyyub and Ali were hosted by the Uppaluri family of East Mesa, whose oldest son, Karthik, had visited Azerbaijan in July with YLP. For the Azerbaijani youth, this was their first trip to the United States. They were eager to explore American culture, economy and educational possibilities, through an intensely enriching encounter.

Eyyub inquired, "Why are we in this program, you ask?" His response was, "It teaches us responsibility. From this, I get so much knowledge I need to have to help my country."

The young republic of Azerbaijan (population 9.2 million, on a 33,500-square-mile area), bordering on Russia and Iran, has been independent for only 20 years. Its culturally diverse population—a "melting pot," Eyyub said—has embraced the values of self-government, liberalism, environmental responsibility and economic opportunity.

U.S. LEARNING EXPERIENCES

A gold mine of learning experiences lay ahead for these exchange students. They would soon experience American society in action, meet people from all walks of life, and access places tourists would never seek.

"My interests are in human rights, history and geography," Eyyub stated. In his world history class, he had learned much about the United States—Union of Soviet Socialist Republics arms race, the Vietnam War, the Korean War and Perestroika, as well as the decline of communism.

Ali was similarly motivated. "I want to be a diplomat in the economic realm," he said. "I want to improve the economy in my country, the income from oil, but also focus on manufacturing and renewable energies."

Both Azerbaijani students attend totally different school systems. Eyyub goes to the British School in Baku, a private institute, which follows the Cambridge model with the familiar A-B-C grading categories.

Ali is enrolled in a public high school, where Russian or Azeri is the teaching language. Each class, of six to nine subjects, is 45 minutes long. School also is held on Saturday. And the scores range from 2 (least) to 5 (best).

Next year, Ali and Eyyub would have to prepare for the university entrance exams, different ones for each institution. High school in Azerbaijan ends with the 11th grade.

AMERICAN STUDENTS IN AZERBAIJAN

Their Arizona YLP equivalents, Karthik Uppaluri and Tendai Mabingani, both in the Westwood International Baccalaureate program, had learned these and other facts on their trip to Azerbaijan earlier this year.

"Students applying for colleges in Azerbaijan have to worry a lot less about the extraneous factors, the extracurricular activities and volunteerism," Tendai observed.

"Yes," Karthik agreed. "Their training in high school is strictly academic. Whereas, American students are evaluated on the whole scope as a person."

Nevertheless, young people in Azerbaijan get involved in various civic causes, such as anti-smoking campaigns (Eyyub) or neighborhood cleanups (Ali). Karthik and Tendai observed and participated in such activities, as well.

"One of my favorite memories was the Peace Corps leadership camp outside of Ganja," Tendai recalled. "We experienced many exercises on how to be a leader."

Karthik was mostly impressed by a visit to the ancient mountain town of Lahij. In this famous mountain town of copper crafts, the American kids got all the attention.

COMMON GROUNDS IN EDUCATION

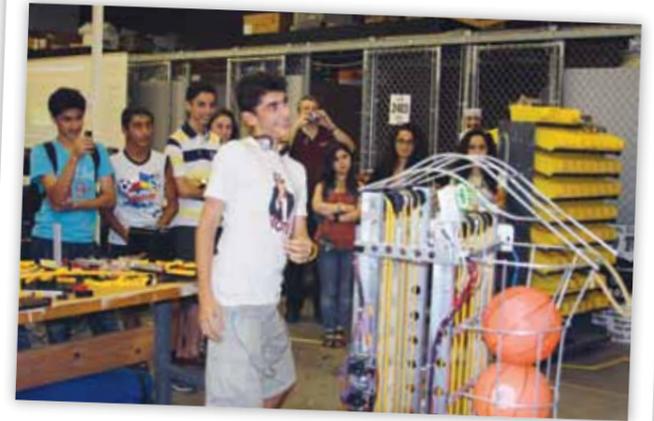
Ideas of future collaborations in education were bound to take root among these exchange students. Foremost, Karthik, an alumnus of the

NASA INSPIRE program, sought to get his Azeri friends interested in educational programs, such as those in which he was involved.

Together with some passionate teammates, Karthik presented the Azerbaijani visitors with a robotics demonstration at Red Mountain High School. The visitors had a ball trying to score some baskets with the *Team Plasma* robot.

Ali and Eyyub, on their part, seemed well versed in American culture. They rejoiced about finally seeing a real Western town and an authentic football game up close. Until then, they had known these things only from the movies. But now, the excitement, cheerleaders, fireworks and hot dogs were real.

"The most important aspect is that American people share with us every day a program full of training," Ali observed. "We are here as tourists, as well as students, and, at the same time, ambassadors."



Robotics Demonstration at Red Mountain High School

common ground than differences. They shared interests in YouTube, Facebook and iTunes as a start. Language was not an obstacle. In addition, they all had ambition, idealism and empathy.

Now, just you wait until they make a difference. ■

To find out more, read Karthik Uppaluri's post, *Adventurer in Azerbaijan*, at the American Council's Web site. Go to <http://americancouncilsforinternationaleducation.wordpress.com/>. Enjoy his flipbook presentation at <http://snack.to/fupfwp9h>



Karthik in Azerbaijan

VALUES OF A COUNTRY

"My outlook changed completely when we visited Washington, D.C.," Eyyub stated. "I talked with our

guide about *e pluribus unum*. It changed the way I look at this country completely. Now, I see what liberty, glory and equality means."

"This trip will help to improve us," Ali said. "Each one of us gained a lot of information that is different from each other. If we implement this experience, we can grow a very beautiful tree from it."

Both Arizona and Azerbaijani students discovered a lot more



Azerbaijani Cityscape

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Azerbaijani exchange students to Arizona experienced the full range of cultural and academic exposure programs. Their busy schedule included the following highlights:

- Grant writing seminar with Courtney Klein, from New Global Citizens
- Maricopa leadership program, with Assistant County Manager Dr. Silva
- Volunteer work, at St. Vincent de Paul and the CASS homeless shelter
- Grand Canyon and Tuba City tours
- Mock Teen Court, at South Mountain High School
- Lesson on civic engagement and the judiciary, with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor
- Many other engagements