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Opinion: A Journey Beyond East St. Louis

Paishynce Prude



East St. Louis high schooler Paishynce Prude (second from left) poses with her host family in Egypt.

Paishynce Prude

I grew up in a close-knit family in East St. Louis. My grandmother's house is just down the street, making family gatherings easy and frequent.

My grandfather was the pastor of our Pentecostal church, Bride of Christ, not far from where we live. He was succeeded by my uncle. And my dad helps out with the music. Our family is large, filled with at least 30 cousins, all connected to the recognizable Prude name. I attend East St. Louis High School with friends I've known since preschool, creating a sense of comfort and belonging. We are all navigating life together, and that shared experience bonds us deeply. Yet I felt a yearning for something beyond this familiar bubble.

Until my sophomore year, I didn't notice how distant I was from other cultures and religions. It wasn't until I engaged with organizations and educational opportunities beyond my city that I recognized how little I interacted with cultures outside my own.

In the summer of 2023, I attended the [Anytown Youth Leadership Institute](#). This week-long program focused on recognizing the experiences of marginalized groups. Surrounded by diverse perspectives, I heard stories of hardship faced by individuals simply practicing their faith. I realized I had never fully recognized my privilege as a Christian.

Returning home, I felt compelled to share my new understanding. It frustrated me that others didn't seem interested in exploring different cultures and faiths. I knew this lack of curiosity stemmed from a gap in knowledge, not intentional indifference. My experience at Anytown ignited a determination in me to broaden my understanding and make exploration more accessible.

This desire to expand my horizons led me to take the leap and travel to Egypt in the summer of 2024 through the [Quest Scholarship Fund](#) that offers global education opportunities to diverse students at St. Louis area high schools.

I wanted to visit a place that mirrored my family's closeness and rich culture. Reading about Egypt, I felt an instant connection to their traditions and foods. The Quest scholarship represented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. When Egypt opened up for travel post-COVID, I knew I had to go.

I was excited to bond with a host family. It meant more to me than just seeing the country; I wanted to deepen my understanding of a different way of life.

As I prepared for the trip, I had already begun researching Islam. I found the strength of its faith deeply admirable.

Upon landing in Cairo, my first impression was overwhelming. The city was alive at 4 in the morning — people were fishing, enjoying music, and shopping.

To ease us into Egyptian culture, we had an orientation that provided insight into local customs. From the beginning, I learned the art of navigating public transportation in Cairo. Each bus was filled with people seamlessly passing money to the front for the fare — no words were needed. It's where I first began to understand the natural sense of community in Cairo.

It felt like everyone had a space for people and animals alike. Mosques coexisted with markets, showing how cultures intertwined in daily life. I appreciated how architecture reflected their ingenuity — mosques elevated to avoid floods and streets curved for shade and airflow. The rich stories behind Cairo's architecture fascinated me and I found it easy to dive headfirst into its extensive history.

I talked with my host father Ahmed about my identity as an African American. He was curious and initially confused, asking if that meant I was from Africa. My host sister Miriam stepped in to explain, and he later shared his perspective. In Egypt, no one cares whether you're black, white, or Asian. Labels didn't matter; what mattered was community.

We spent time playing board games at local coffee shops and sharing laughter over meals. One of my most memorable experiences was our journey on the Nile. The significance of traveling on this ancient river was profound, and sharing music, dances, and stories with my fellow exchange students and host siblings created beautiful moments. It was heartwarming to see our cultures blend in such an organic way.

This immersion into daily life in Egypt opened my eyes to perspectives I could never have learned from a textbook. This allowed me to appreciate the depth of my host family's traditions and how we are all intertwined in the human experience. I am determined to return one day.

Back home, I plan to share my story with my community. Misconceptions often shape the judgments we make about others. By sharing my experience, I hope to encourage others to embrace open-mindedness and see people and cultures beyond their stereotypes. I believe this opportunity will also help me in my future career as a mechanical engineer.

I want to thank my scholarship donors for making this opportunity possible. Never in my life could I have fathomed going abroad, and the impact that it has left on me is something I am forever grateful for.

With this new experience, I feel more equipped to foster dialogue about cultural differences and promote tolerance. I am certain there are others in similar situations — people unaware of the cultural gaps that exist. Through open conversations about these differences, I believe we can build a more inclusive and accepting society.

Ultimately, I want to help dispel stereotypes that divide us and encourage a future where we can all coexist peacefully.

Prude is an East St. Louis High School senior. She aims to attend an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) and forge a career in mechanical engineering. Her commentary was edited and supported by the River City Journalism Fund.