Arabian-American at home in Jordanian school

By Lea Kahn
Staff Writer

It’s a universal anthem for teenagers — who am I, and where do I fit in?

For Anais Amer, it has been especially challenging. She was born in the United States, and considers herself to be a Palestinian-American.

That’s because three of Anais’ four grandparents were born and raised in the Middle East. Anais’ mother, Nadia Amer, was born in the United States and grew up in Ewing Township and Trenton, while her father, Mohamed Amer, was born in Saudi Arabia and raised in Jordan.

“I went through middle school (at Princeton Day School) and I was lost. I was puzzled. Who am I? You either conform to fit in with the majority, or with the minority. Up until the eighth grade, I conformed to the majority,” said Anais, now a sophomore at the private school.

But freshman year at Princeton Day School marked a turning point for Anais. That’s when she decided that she wanted to connect with her Arab roots and Arab culture. Proudly declaring that she is a Palestinian-American, she said she wanted to embrace her grandparents’ culture.

But how do you do that?

Anais Amer

By attending the Arabic Year program at King’s Academy, which is a private boarding school in Jordan. The program offers high school students an opportunity to learn Arabic and to become immersed in Middle East culture, while still taking many of the same courses that they would be taking if they had stayed at home.

Anais, who is spending the school year at King’s Academy, said she learned about the school and the Arabic Year program through her sister’s friend. Her sister attended the “Go Palestine” summer camp for teenagers on the West Bank. Her sister’s friend, who attended King’s Academy, told her about the school and the Arabic Year program.

With some trepidation, Anais applied to King’s Academy. She said she did not think she would be accepted at the prestigious school, but was encouraged by one of her teachers at Princeton Day School to “get out of your comfort zone” — she applied and was accepted.

The King’s Academy, located about 30 minutes from Amman, was founded in 2007 by Jordan’s King Abdullah II. It is modeled after Deerfield Academy, an elite boarding school in Massachusetts that the king attended as a youth.

More than 500 students are enrolled at the King’s Academy, mostly from Middle East countries. But there are many students from North America, Asia, Africa and Europe. Students in the Arabic Year program live with other students in the dormitories.

The Arabic Year offers students an intense study of the Arabic language and also exposes them to Arab culture, said Anais, who spent a few days at home in Princeton before returning to Jordan.

Students take two Arabic courses back-to-back in the morning, learning how to speak Arabic and how to write it. The rest of the day, students take traditional courses — English, history, math, and science — and also play sports. Those courses are taught in English.

Learning Arabic was less challenging for Anais than perhaps for other international students, because it’s a familiar language. She said her grandparents and her father speak Arabic, so she had some “loose understanding” of it.

While Anais had some familiarity with Arab culture, there were still some surprises.

She admits that she had some preconceived ideas about what life in Jordan would be like. She believed that Jordan and Arabs would be backwards, but she soon realized that there is much globalization in Jordan.

There are upscale shopping malls, and movies, Anais said. There are lawns on campus — not sand. And if you are hankering for a cup of Starbucks coffee or a Big Mac, you can find a Starbucks or McDonald’s fast-food restaurant.

“With time, Jordan has become westernized — not less Arabic per se, but less strict. I didn’t have to wear a hijab or pray five times a day. Teenagers like to listen to American music. They were impressed that I am an American,” she said.

While she is in Jordan, Anais said, she is respectful of their culture. But she discovered, during off-campus excursions, that the Jordanian men would make catcalls and whistle at her. Women are expected to serve men, which did not sit well with Anais, who is a self-described feminist.

Anais also discovered that family is more important in Jordan than in the United States. In Princeton, she spends times with her friends and they go into town. Family is not important in the United States.

But in Jordan, “family is a big deal” and family connections are important, Anais said. The weekend begins on Thursday and ends on Saturday, and Anais said she was invited to spend the weekend with her new Arab friends and their families.

“The fact that you are an Arab, they welcomed me into their home with open arms,” Anais said.

Friday is a “day of gathering,” she said. The family eats its meals together. Spending the weekend with her new Arab friend “added to my understanding of the culture. I felt like an American, but at the same time, I (also) felt like an Arab. I felt more comfortable among other Arabs,” she said.

And while the Middle East is scary to most people, Anais said she was not afraid. She said she felt that she would be traveling to a place where she would feel at ease. If she was scared about anything, she said, it was that “I would be perceived as too foreign — too Arabic here (in the United States) and too American there. But we found common ground.”

“The United States is all I have ever known. Going to Jordan for a year, both (countries) have good and bad. You learn to appreciate the good of both. To me, living in Jordan gives me comfort. I am an Arab, and I want to embrace it here in America,” Anais said.