



Wilkes University presents
the 2013 Colonels Abroad Essay Contest
First Place to
YEHIA ALZAWAIDAH
For International Student Studying in the U.S.



As a young man raised in the Middle East, I couldn't be less affected by the circumstances and international conflicts happening around the borders of my country. My life was simple and I believed I was much the same as all the other young people around me. My world was a very small place, yet it witnessed the results of intolerance and extremism.

For a long time, I thought that that is the case everywhere in the world, and that different people need different worlds to live. Before arriving here, I had prepared myself mentally to be faced with all the types of discrimination based on my personal views and beliefs.

In the first visit to the USA, I expected going through many problems because of how I look, or because of where I come from. I was sometimes hesitant to joining social gathering with other people fearing it might become a confrontation or lead to sectarian arguments. It wasn't very long when all my fears withered away.

Then, I realized that the most integral aspect that I had perceived as central to human interaction, namely religion, was no more than a superficial man-made label that has been used for something other than its essential purpose; it has been used to segregate people and a tool of suppression.

Now, after two years in the USA, I have started viewing the world through different binoculars. I have realized that being a good citizen and a good person is more important, and it surely is, than being a devout worshipper or a hard believer.

John F Kennedy once said "Tolerance implies no lack of commitment to one's own beliefs.

Rather it condemns the oppression or persecution of others."

I believe these words summarize the nature of peaceful coexistence in America. Here, the traditional labels have been voluntarily put aside to focus on more uniting values; on the top of which is national identity. I grew up in a community with some degree of misconceptions and even prejudice against democracy and religion.

However, coming to the USA allowed me to see that a Jewish temple might be just across the street from a church, and a Muslim family might live on that same street. All exist in harmony under their American identity. I believe what unites them all is the value they place on democracy and accepting the other within a larger nation.

This reminds me of some great words of a truly great man, Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."

Now with the democratic movements back at home in the Middle East, and with my renewed faith in peaceful humanity and coexistence as I've seen in North East Pennsylvania, I feel the future holds many promises for us back there.

I dream of a better Middle East where people from all origins, faiths and races can coexist to achieve unity and equity among their peoples. My experience in America has transformed me from viewing the world from a single narrow view onto viewing the world and people as a unity that aspires to live and be productive members of a larger society.