Around Campus

An Accent on Scholarship
BY ROBERT SPENCER KNotts

At NSU, seven students are in an especially prestigious category. They are Fulbright students from around the world studying in the Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution.

“All of these students have a common denominator,” said Judith McKay, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Multidisciplinary Studies in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, which hosts these Fulbright students. “They can imagine that things can be different and that they can be part of that difference.”

The students are Tami Rafidi and Adnan Abdalla, both Palestinian; Nawal Al-Jawhari from Jordan; Solomon Losha from Cameroon; Hassan Khannenje from Kenya; Cyril Adonis from South Africa; and Ronald Mabunga from the Philippines.

The Fulbright scholars learn about the theory, research, and practice of conflict and resolution from “every different angle,” said McKay, from community projects such as the Peace Place to talking to a variety of groups.

“At home, I teach undergraduate and graduate school,” said Mabunga, 40. “I should be able to develop the peace education curriculum at my university and perhaps elsewhere in the Philippines.”

The Fulbright students came to South Florida because NSU operates one of only two programs within the United States offering a Ph.D. in conflict analysis and resolution. The other is at George Mason University in Virginia.

“We’re proud to have them here, and I think they’re proud to be here,” said Neil Katz, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, which has about 450 students.

The scholars’ challenges include adjusting to American culture and education and meeting their financial needs after the two-year funding from the Fulbright program ends. “Unfortunately, trying to scrape enough money to pay for finishing their degree requirements after the initial two years of Fulbright funding adds significant stress to our Fulbright scholars,” said Katz. The award pays for two years of academic work, but the Ph.D. program requires three years of courses plus a qualifying exam and dissertation, which may require additional years.

Still, the NSU experience is invaluable, Fulbright scholars say.

“This course introduced me to cultural aspects of conflict,” said Al-Jawhari, 44, who is a judge in Jordan. Al-Jawhari says she is likely to focus her dissertation on issues related to water disputes in the Middle East.

That happens many times. “Most of the Fulbright dissertations are about issues back home,” said McKay. “They will bring what they learn here back home and apply it to their own cultures.”

The students’ experiences at NSU also will have an impact on the future of their countries, McKay said. “These scholars are considered to be in the top level of their country in terms of academics and are viewed as having the potential to be significant leaders in their country—whether it’s in politics, culture, or academics.”

During their stay, the scholars have done more than widen their own perspectives, McKay said. They’ve also enlightened NSU’s homegrown student body. “Sometimes students have preconceptions and these get challenged as they’re exposed to students from other cultures,” she said. “We have a lot of ‘Ah-ha’ moments. And a lot of ‘Oh!’ Eyes get opened to new things.”

THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST
Established in 1946, the Fulbright Program is the largest U.S. international exchange program, allowing students and professionals to pursue graduate study, teaching, and advanced research worldwide. Fulbright scholars are selected for their academic merit and leadership potential. About 6,000 grants were awarded in 2008, with primary funding from the United States government.