



Michigan Memories

A Year in the Life of a ZU Graduate

by Hana Alawi

Soon after graduating from Zayed University in 2005 with a degree in Finance, Hana Alawi traveled to the US as part of a traineeship program with AIESEC, an international organization for students interested in finance and economics. The AIESEC program enables its participants to develop their potential through learning opportunities and aims to have the participants use their newfound skills to positively impact their own communities. Below, Hana shares her reflections on her yearlong experience in the USA, a country she now considers to be her "second home."

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Now that I am back in the United Arab Emirates I cannot even imagine what I was like as a fresh graduate anymore. My year-long AIESEC experience in Michigan was more than a traineeship with a financial company to enhance my educational background. It also provided me with insight into my personal life through influences from international friends and an involvement in a culture that is unique in its tradition.

As I relive those old days, I recall the details of my experience. It all started when I graduated from Zayed University, enthusiastic to explore the world and eager to gain international experience. I had many opportunities lined up: working in Dubai, pursuing a master's degree or starting my own business. Each opportunity ensured a life of ease with the comfort of being around my family and living in the country I grew up in, but I wanted to surpass my comfort zone. That is how I came to take a traineeship opportunity with AIESEC, where I would live a challenging life and run from point A to point Z with no one to depend on but myself, and a tight salary that barely covered my monthly living expenses.



Hana enjoys dinner with an American family she was very close with. Their kids had just returned from the U.A.E.

With this independence came expectations from myself, my job and my friends, all of which had to be met. At work, expectations were clearly set regarding punctuality during working hours, meeting project deadlines, and dealing with customers. Being in such a new environment amongst different cultures, knowledge levels and languages challenged me to integrate into the company, especially as an Arab girl wearing *hijab*. With the goal of proving myself, I wanted my hard work and achievements to stand for themselves rather than rely upon my background.

As a finance student I was expected to know a lot more than what I learned from books. With the help of a leader, a guide, and a manager I learned through first-hand experience by initiating research which studied the US economy and looked into new markets where my company could expand. Through this research, I came to the implicit understanding of how to apply what I learned from books during my years of study to the real world.

Along with work, I also had personal expectations of enjoying as much as possible of the States: mingling with its people, learning its culture and celebrating Thanksgiving, Halloween, and Christmas. The reason for celebrating Christmas may differ slightly between Muslims and Christians in regards to Jesus being God, but it is a celebration of an influential human on mankind. A few days before Christmas a close American friend invited me to decorate her grandparents' tree with them. It was the first time I ever decorated a Christmas tree. We then went caroling around houses in the hope of collecting money for those in need. At first I was shy and afraid of people's reaction to a girl in *hijab* taking part in Christmas. However, I was filled with relief when I was met with smiles and thanks for embodying the Christmas spirit. I spent Christmas Eve with my American family, who delightedly took me in as part of their family. We went to church and then we opened presents.

Being an individual will never be as fulfilling as being a member of a team—a family. They say that Americans have fewer family values than we do and in many cases I found this to be true. However, if this experience has taught me anything it is to appreciate my family and friends even more. I also learned to understand that the world does not revolve around me, my religion or my country. This experience pushed me to discover and acquire knowledge of the world's differences and to truly and deeply discover myself.

This experience was truly unique, inspiring and I have learned a lot. One piece of advice I would give anyone looking to take a large step in their lives is to know yourself through experience. You will never truly discover yourself until you are pushed out of your comfort zone and forced to adapt. ■■

Hana Alawi is a 2005 graduate from Zayed University's College of Business Sciences.