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My Global Identity: WSU Alumni Blogs

Winona State University

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“Discovering and Defining Who I Am” Alumni Blogs: Members of the theme team helped to identify global voices for a new “Discovering & Defining Who I Am” series published by WSU Blogs. Two international alumni and one Study Abroad alumna shared stories about identity, persistence, and their connections to Winona and to the world.

- [**A Saudi Civil Engineer, Published August 18, 2020**](#)
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Discovering and Defining Who I am: A Saudi Civil Engineer, Published August 18, 2020

In honor of this year's theme, WSU alumni are sharing their stories about how they discovered and defined who they were. Meet our first volunteer writer, Abdullah AL Dharfan:



In 2015, I decided to come to the United States to learn English as a second language. The beautiful and quiet city of Winona treated me with kindness and smiles.

I joined ELC (the English Language Center) at WSU where I found the perfect environment for learning. As an international student who barely knew the city and spoke little English, WSU made it easier for me to find everything I needed, like the bookstore, library, cafeteria, and more.

The teachers at the ELC made learning more interesting. They filled the room with excitement and used different teaching techniques—like group work and interviews—which greatly improved my skills and confidence.

I learned how to read, speak, write, listen, and search for information in English. I graduated from the ELC in 2016 and returned home to Saudi Arabia with an incredible education and unforgettable memories under my belt.

Learning English enhanced my major in civil engineering at Jazan University. As an engineering student, searching for more information and reading books related to the field is a must. Because most useful information and books are written in English, I have an advantage to learn more and faster.

Speaking a global language has increased my social contacts. I meet friends online through Instagram, Snapchat, and other platforms. I also make connections when traveling, which makes it fun even when I'm alone.

A new idea I began working on this year was creating my own clothing brand. I want to design street looks that combine different cultures and modern designs, a hybrid inspired by my Saudi background and my American

education. I'm hoping to start with designing tops and pants for all genders, then working my way to bags and even home decor.

Communicating with people around the globe has opened up new opportunities, especially when it comes to starting a business. I'm reaching out to manufacturers and designers from China, Germany, and Turkey to make my clothing brand come to life.

I've traveled to quite a few places domestically and internationally. Within the United States. I've traveled to Miami, Las Vegas, New York, and Washington, D.C. To reward myself after working hard in school, I traveled to the Philippines and Azerbaijan for pleasure.

I believe sharing ideas and listening to others who come from different backgrounds improves the quality of a product. Being able to travel around the world has taught me to accept others with different beliefs, cultures, and races. Our differences can improve the quality of life.

Traveling and connecting with people has also opened my eyes, and I now see a colorful world full of love, caring, and kindness. My experiences got me closer to the world around me, freed my spirit, and opened up my mind.

We grow up with time, but we learn with experience.

Knowing who you are can play a role in defining your identity and living a happy life.

My family focused on my wants and needs as a child, and I adopted that mentality as a grown man now. I know what I want to be in life and the things that I like and dislike. But most importantly, I know how I belong to the world around me and how I interact with it.

I am a proud Saudi, but I also belong to every country I've been to.

Discovering and Defining Who I am: A Latina Advocate, Published September 2, 2020

In honor of this year's theme, WSU alumni are sharing their stories about how they discovered and defined who they were. Meet our second volunteer writer, Andrea Guerrero Leon:



I moved to Winona in 2014 after graduating high school from my home country Venezuela. I began my journey at WSU as an English Language Center (ELC) student. Although my English wasn't perfect, my professors, classmates and friends helped me become fluent through conversations.

I had the opportunity to meet and build friendships with people from many different countries. We learned a lot from each other's cultures while also learning English.

After graduating from the ELC, I started my higher education journey as a nursing candidate. But even though I enjoyed taking science classes, I had a feeling the profession wasn't for me. So, I decided to change my major to [Mass Communication](#) out of my interest in visual communication.

During my undergraduate studies, I developed a strong passion for social justice. I was confident this was the field I wanted to grow in as a professional.

In 2016, I volunteered as a mentor for [HOPE Academy](#), a residential program for underrepresented high school students to experience college life. I mentored students from a variety of ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientation.

I'm extremely grateful to have learned from their experiences as black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), as well as expand my own knowledge of social justice issues.

I also volunteered as an International Student Ambassador that same year. I connected with students with diverse cultures and languages I wasn't familiar with, while helping them navigate college life and a new culture.

My identity as a Latina has solidified through the years as I interacted and built relationships with members of the Latino community.

Gaining a stronger sense of my identity has given me the strength to advocate not only for my community, but also for other underprivileged populations.

After graduating with my B.A in 2018, I decided that I wanted to pursue a master's degree in counseling. I was awarded a Graduate Assistantship position in the [Adult & Continuing Education](#) department to finance my studies, which I'm still appreciative of to this day.

Because of the [Counselors Education](#) program, I was inspired to become more involved in social justice conversations, as well as those of advocacy. This program also motivated me to better understand the impact that these issues have on youth mental health.

I want to continue advocating for BIPOC as a mental health counselor. I especially want to work with children and adolescents of color and help them navigate obstacles in society. My journey at Winona State led me to my dream field, and I couldn't be more excited for what's to come.

Discovering and Defining Who I am: A Polish Cultural Educator & Data Analyst, Published September 24, 2020

In honor of this year's theme, WSU alumni are sharing their stories about how they discovered and defined who they were. Meet our third volunteer writer, Nina Horabik:



Growing up in a family of Polish immigrants, I found myself curious about other countries and cultures from a young age. I often heard stories from my mother's and father's families about life back in Poland, as well as the obstacles they faced while trying to build a new life in America. This sparked the beginning of what became my life path.

I was drawn to the idea of working with individuals from other countries, and I thought the way to do so would be through immigration law. My family members and other immigrants told me how they faced many challenges while gaining American citizenship to provide better opportunities to their families. Because of this, I felt compelled to help those aspiring to do the same.

As a high school student, I took Spanish and Chinese language courses, self-studied a little of Korean, and volunteered at the [McHenry County Courthouse](#) as a peer juror to learn early on about other languages, cultures, and American legal proceedings.

I began my journey to become an immigration lawyer at Winona State University in August of 2016 by majoring in [Legal Studies](#) and minoring in [Data Science](#). I instantly got involved in many of WSU's student organizations, including West Campus' Leadership House Interest Community, Society of Young Legal Professionals, and [International Club](#). This start made me feel confident I was on my way toward my true path.

My connection with WSU's International Club is what intensified my passion for working with diverse individuals and becoming educated on what it means to be a global citizen.

I found myself making some of my first international friends while adding [Japanese Studies](#) as a minor. I even got scouted out to join the English Language Center's (ELC) team while on the International Club's annual ski trip! Joining this international community inspired me to dive headfirst into what really brings me fulfillment.

I was elected as International Club Vice President at the end of my freshman year, and I worked on running the club alongside my other board members from May 2017 to May 2018. Simultaneously, I was the office assistant, activities assistant and tutor for ELC, which helped me get closer to the international student body as a whole.

Being a fundamental piece of one of the biggest student organizations on WSU's campus and WSU's English language learning community gave me a sense of importance and helped me feel like I could make a difference outside of law.

I found that my true path wasn't tied to law or being in the U.S. for that matter—I itched to go out and explore. That's when I changed my major to my at-the-time minor halfway through my sophomore year.

As a bilingual speaker, growing up and being an avid language learner since high school made it feel natural when learning different coding languages and telling a story through data. It was meaningful to me that the Data Science major was more diverse and had many career opportunities globally for me to pursue.

I experienced an unfortunate event as well at this time that brought me closer to my club members. In February 2018, I had an apartment fire that resulted in unlivable conditions and emergency relocation. This happened the same day we were meant to have our weekly International Club meeting.

I was immediately welcomed into the homes of many of my board and club members. I was so touched to have the love and support from my club community, and I found myself starting to live with international students.

I instantly fell in love with the dynamics and exchange opportunities that came with living with international students, and I continued doing so for the rest of my undergraduate career.

While at WSU, I worked hard to understand data science within various cultural contexts. After finishing my year of being International Club Vice President, I continued being a member of the club, joining more of WSU's [student-lead cultural organizations](#) like Japan Club and Korea Club, and maintaining my employment at the ELC, which later became English Language Programs (ELP).

Due to my involvement in WSU's international community as a student and student worker, I expanded my cultural awareness and began networking with [WSU's Center for Global Education](#). Creating connections with Susan Pham, Director of Study Abroad, and Renee Stowell, Center of Global Education's scholarship advisor, I began self-reflecting on not only what I wanted my undergraduate career to look like, but also the rest of my life.

Ever since I first learned about Korea's turbulent history in high school, the parallels between Korea and Poland's challenges to national sovereignty instantly drew me in. Although they are very different countries, both have a history of overcoming occupation and maintaining proud and prominent cultures.

Because there were no opportunities to formally learn Korean at my high school or at WSU, I never thought I'd be able to pursue this interest. However, the persuasion and support from my global connections helped me open my eyes to the options that did exist at the university.

The friendships I made through the international student body and Susan Pham's encouragement gave me courage to actively participate in the Korean culture and go on a short-term program to [Chung-Ang University \(CAU\)](#) the summer of 2018. There, I was finally able to formally study the language I fell in love with and personally integrate into Korean society.

Upon my return to the U.S., I immediately planned for another exchange to Korea. I continued immersing myself in Korean culture by living with Korean international students, being an active member of the student cultural organizations at WSU, and engaging with ELP's students and staff.

Also, during the year leading up to my next exchange program at CAU, I began working closely with Renee Stowell on multiple scholarship applications to explore studying and working in Korea outside of study abroad programs.

Through her help and assistance, I was able to be a semi-finalist in the 2018-2019 Critical Language Scholarship, an alternate for the 2019-2020 Boren Awards, and worked on my application for the English Teaching Assistant Fulbright Scholarship during my time abroad.

During my second exchange to Korea for the Fall 2019 semester, I took advantage of my extended stay to gain a deeper understanding of English language education and effective teaching strategies from the Korean point of view. I also expanded my experience teaching English to Korean students.

I joined CAU's Korea Club to meet Korean and international students at my exchange university, and I was granted the Global Student Internship by CAU's Office of International Affairs, which specifically dealt with aiding English language learners.

When I returned to WSU for my final semester, I wanted to finish my time as an undergraduate student strong. Although the COVID-19 pandemic started and all my expectations had to be modified, I was lucky enough to be nominated by Katie Subra, Director of ELP, and selected by WSU's Learning & Community Engagement Committee, as an awardee of the 2020 WSU President's Student Leadership Award.

This final honor made me feel so heart-warmed—my dedication to WSU was recognized!



Through the tools that WSU instilled in me and Renee Stowell's guidance, I have an exciting journey ahead of me. In April of 2020, I was awarded as a finalist for the 2020 – 2021 Fulbright Scholarship – South Korea Elementary English Teaching Assistantship.

In addition to teaching English at an elementary school, I proposed to get involved in a national women's organization in South Korea as part of my grant.

I intend to gain a deeper understanding of the culture of working women in Korea, but I'm particularly interested in the atmosphere for women in STEM fields.

Given the global pandemic, my award year will be drastically different than expected, but I intend to have a meaningful impact.

Through my Fulbright experience, I hope to walk away with insight about the unbreakable Korean spirit, expand my understanding of cultural context through engaging with my community, and learn more about the Korean perspective through teaching and learning from my students.