

Synopsis of interview with Gail Chester
May 14, 2008

Coming to Qatar. Husband accepted position as CIO, came home. Gail asked "What little town in Texas is that?"

Wanted to support husband in his career, opportunity to learn new things, Gail arrived August 23 or 25, 2003, stepping off the plane into a wall of hot humid heat.

Everyone did much more than the title or job description. Lots of overlap.

Surviving: camaraderie of the first group. No one knew how to find things, where to buy goods, every day people reported to the other what new discoveries they had made. Lots of laughter over getting lost.

Had worked at TEES as a project administrator, had worked on Dr. Holste's project. Tim Chester had known Joe and Shannon Estrada. Knew of people or had some connection prior to arriving.

Worked very closely together the first semester. Gail started as assistant for the director of admissions and record, then promoted to assistant director of student records. Started off as receptionist for the entire university. Trained an Iraqi lady to take over as receptionist, "Alia," a civil engineer by training, helped Gail learn simple things about the culture, some simple phrases in Arabic.

Was responsible for all student records, had to develop filing and online systems, communicating back to main campus. Learning about Arabic names: first names, family names. Explaining this to main campus staff was surprising, also created multiple files because of the different ways that names are transliterated into English.

Difficult to learn not to extend her hand in greeting to men. Had to put hands in pockets for a while.

Spent three and a half years in Qatar, from Aug 2003 until Jan 2007.

Also was an admin assistant for Student Affairs, and for the academic advisors. Lots to juggle. Fortunate because co-workers let focus rest on admissions processes, had to develop brochures, get photographs, plan events for students. Admitted first class in July 2003, but had to start admission process for next class immediately.

Unique challenges

What was needed, and now to put it in place. Time difference: one hour overlap during daylight savings time, but no overlap during standard time. Had to work late to schedule and hold videoconferences.

Five faculty started, two other faculty/administrators (Dr. Holste taught and was Dean, Tim Chester was CIO and taught a EE course.) Greg Klein and Tingwen (Huang) taught Math, Curtis Farmer taught English.

About twenty people in all, occupied Villa #7. Moved out by Sept 2003 to the Cornell building. Helped move computers, put them in the trunk of the car and drove them across the sand. Dr. Holste moved as many computers as Gail did.

“A deep and rich [experience] in my soul.”

Changes over time

Told to be careful, dress conservatively, no need to cover, but inappropriate to wear sleeveless or short-sleeved shirt. By 2007, more women wearing less: shorts, short or sleeveless, less conservative. Took a trip where Gail had to cover, and couldn't wrap the scarf well. Got laughed at by friends for doing it so badly.

It's easy to be a woman in Qatar, because of the tolerance, but should be conservative.

Changes aren't surprising in the university, but its much better now. Files used to be stored in moving boxes, now have furniture and better communication, have systems and procedures in place. Things are where they need to be, as was the goal.

Gail is proud of everything that people have accomplished: the same programs as in College Station.

Starting out, the programs were going to be for Qataris, but the student body is very international – all over the world. The vision for that came from Joe Estrada. He had an idea for bringing students in from diverse locations. It helps students from the region by staying close to home, but studying at an American university. Even now starting study abroad and exchange programs.

Vision of Education City

Sheikha Mozah and many others have made it work. Other projects tried in other places. Qatar Foundation allows each program to remain close to its home university. Didn't have to mold each into a homogeneous identify, could retain the individual culture and remain individual in identity. Students want that: want the Texas A&M degree and experience.

Visiting with the parents, concern was for the degree from Texas A&M. Parents and students want to have the identity that comes with the degree. Families are close, and parents and students want to stay close together, and work to have the best for their family.

If a girl wanted to be an engineer, sometimes parents (mothers) didn't thing a girl should. Some mothers remarked after visiting, that they would be comfortable sending their daughters to TAMUQ because people were friendly and trusted their daughters to be safe and well cared for.

Co-workers were Egyptian, Jordanian, Qatari and Palestinian.

Leaving Qatar, had hoped to come back to visit and see the first class graduate. Sad to realize how fast the time had gone by, seemed like six months. There was SO much to do. Had a lot to do, “but it just went by too quickly.” Hard to say goodbye.

Importing an American culture into an Arabic culture

Ask a lot of questions about how things are done, what works, answering questions about student information system, why do you need information, working with many nationalities, finding out about each others views and culture without making judgments. Learned a lot by just asking.

Most thankful that college age children were able to visit and share the experience, are more interested in international experience in the future. Gail is more open to seeing different ways of doing things.

Didn't need a lot of outside experience, just being here [in Qatar] was Gail's entertaining

Coffee story

Occupied two hallways and a reception area in the Cornell building. Got a coffeepot from Carrefour, that took about an hour to brew. Gail used to make the coffee in the mornings, and by the time it was finished, all twenty people would go get their coffee. Made a mission to get an industrial strength coffee maker. Found a place, went back many times, but never found it open. Finally went to the store when it was open, and then had to find an adapter to be able to plug it in.