

Washington County teacher returns from stint working in Saudi Arabian schools

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — With three suitcases in hand, a backpack and \$800 in his pocket, Luke Parks disembarked a plane in the summer of 2018 and took his first steps on the foreign soil of Western Asia — several thousand miles from the only home he'd known in the mountains of Southwest Virginia.

The Washington County native was a physical education teacher at Holston High and Meadowview Elementary schools for eight years before the educator decided it was the perfect time to see the world.

The teacher with wanderlust has spent the last two years teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

While most teachers opt to stay closer to home, Parks combined his love for teaching with his yearning to travel to connect with people around the globe.

The former Washington County teacher is home for the holidays, spending time with his Abingdon family and sharing stories about his adventures as a middle school teacher halfway around the world.

Because international travel was shut down due to COVID-19, Parks couldn't travel home this summer, making it more than a year since he's seen his mother, grandmother and siblings.

"There's no place like home," said Parks, who was taking a run on the Virginia Creeper Trail one day last week. When he got to Saudi Arabia, he joined a running club and has run two ultramarathons just this year.

Answered prayers

Teaching internationally is a way to travel, gain work experience and do good all at the same time, according to Parks, a graduate of the University of Virginia's College at Wise.

In 2016, while teaching at Meadowview Elementary, he began thinking — and dreaming — about opportunities abroad.

"I prayed that I wanted some adventure and whimsy in my life," said the teacher. "I wanted the ability to do good and to help people out. God gave me exactly what I asked for but not quite the package I was expecting."

"I easily could have spent the rest of my teaching career in Washington County, but I liked the sound of adventure of Saudi Arabia."

He came close to not accepting the international job offer because he wanted to work in poverty-stricken areas to help meet basic needs. Saudi Arabia has a reputation as a country of wealth, with the highest gross domestic product in the Middle East.

"But one of the reasons I picked Saudi Arabia is because it's in the middle of the globe



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Luke Parks during his travels in Western Asia and the Middle East. After teaching in Washington County schools for several years, Parks set off to teach in Saudi Arabia in 2018.



and close to so many cool countries," he said.

Often enduring the struggles of living in a single-parent family when he was a child, Parks has a heart for helping others.

His job in Saudi Arabia has allowed him to hang out with children in an orphanage in nearby Tanzania, where he also helped install a catfish pond to improve the people's livelihood.

"I'm not working in Saudi Arabia to live a flashy life," Parks said. "I'm working there to give myself greater financial opportunities for the future. I may teach at another international school when I leave here. Inadvertently, I also can share my love of Christ just by being

the person Jesus Christ wants me to be."

Leaving home

Parks was offered and accepted the international teaching job in 2018, after attending a recruitment fair for international teaching hosted by the University of Northern Iowa.

"I wanted to get out of debt before I left, so I sold my 1966 Ford and gave my car to my mom."

Parks showed up in the Middle Eastern country one August night, not knowing what it would look like or how it would be.

"It was hotter than I ever had imagined — about 118 degrees — and I wondered right off the bat what I had gotten myself into."

The days that followed put Parks at ease and reassured him he was where God wanted him to be.

In Saudi Arabia, Parks lives in a gated residential community that is built close to the world's largest oil reserve. The employees of the oil company and their families live and go to school in the compound. The schools are owned by the oil company, and Parks' students are the children of employees who work at the oil reserve.

Outside the compound walls, residents must abide by rules that ban things like gender mixing in public and the use of alcohol, which actually is banned throughout the country. Few people speak English.

But inside the compound, life is very different, said Parks. Within that compound, the way of life resembles more of a California city than a Saudi town.

The differences are obvious, he said.

Women are not required to wear their loose-fitting robes, and they can drive — a right just recently given to all women in the country.

"The country is making progressive moves. A cinema outside the compound was put in just this year," said Parks.

Inside the compound, everyday life resembles a small city. "I can ride my bike to school in 10 minutes," he said. "It reminds me of a small city with a movie theater, bowling alley and restaurants. We even have a Chili's restaurant."

Saudi Arabia is a wealthy country with people who love to shop for the finer things in life, he said. "But they still hold strongly to their culture and the importance of their families. Coming from a big family, I was able to fit in quite well.

"A lot of people move to Saudi Arabia and never leave the compound," said the teacher. "I try to get out as much as I can, to immerse myself in the culture and build relationships with the people."

Out of six schools in the compound, Parks' school is the largest, with about 1,000 students in grades five through nine. Class sizes are manageable with 20 to 25 students.

He said the diversity of students is the greatest difference between schools in America and those in Saudi.

Many of the students' parents are from Pakistan, India, Japan and even Canada. And there are all kinds of religious backgrounds, too.

The students are bilingual, with all of them required to speak English.

All of the children come from two-parent households, which is a requirement for living in the compound, he said.

'Meeting new neighbors'

Through this adventure, Parks has learned that people are the same wherever you go.

"It's not the distance, it's the way you treat one another. When you have that mindset, world travel simply means meeting your new neighbors, and that's pretty cool if you ask me."

The teacher is not sure where his path will lead him next, but he is certain it will offer him the joys of serving others.

"I followed an inkling from God to come here. I'm just hoping he gives me another inkling when the time is right."

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