

Iowa State, UAE embassy honor late student with study abroad scholarship

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The late Maktoum Al Seiri wanted to give his peers a different picture of his home, the United Arab Emirates, than most prospective travelers might have in their minds,



Seiri

So, quite literally, he invited people into his home.

Al Seiri is being remembered for that warm, welcoming and proud unofficial ambassadorship.

“Maktoum wanted people to know the UAE as a very generous country,” said Ebby Luvaga, an Iowa State University economics professor who

“We wanted Maktoum’s memory here at Iowa State to outlive all of us.”

Ebby Luvaga

Iowa State University economics professor

is one of the directors for the university’s Culture and Economic Diversification in the United Arab Emirates study abroad program.

Iowa State and the Emirati embassy to the U.S. in Washington, D.C. are honoring Al Seiri — a 2019 graduate of the university who died at the age of 22 in

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“[Maktoum] just really liked the fact that people were going to visit his country, he was very proud of it and he wanted to share as much as he could.”

Amani Elobeid
Luvaga and fellow economics professor

Scholarship

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a car crash in January 2020 — with an endowed scholarship that will support students who participate in the study abroad program that he heavily involved in.

Many people may know the UAE — an oil-rich nation located on the Arabian Peninsula between the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman — for Dubai, a city of wealth, luxury, artificial islands and lavish architecture that includes Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world.

“It’s not often that those people who go for the glitz and glamor in Dubai get into an Emirati home. So that was really a treat for our students,” Luvaga said of Al Seiar’s and his family’s hospitality.

Feasts and fedoras

The UAE study abroad program that Luvaga and fellow economics professor Amani Elobeid direct started in 2013 but didn’t take a group of students to the Emirates again until 2017.

The 11-day experience during Thanksgiving break has more recently been including more than 20 students — 26 in November, only since 2017 having taken a one-year pause in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic — and the average cost for each student above their tuition for the semester is between \$4,300 and \$4,600, Luvaga said.

Students in the program study the UAE’s economy and culture and interact with company representatives and others, according to the program’s previous application page.

As the program got going again in 2017, Elobeid said they wanted students to meet with peers from the UAE before the trip, and Al Seiar — who was studying chemical engineering and went on to work for the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company — was one of those students who accepted the invitation to come to class to share information and answer questions.

The invitation had been to come a couple of times, but instead, Al Seiar started coming to every class.

“He just really liked the fact that people were going to visit his country, he was very proud of it and he wanted to share as much as he could,” Elobeid said.

His involvement did not stop there, however. When the 2017 group went to the UAE, Al Seiar met them in Abu Dhabi, the capital, and on the spot invited all 21 people to his home — technically, his parents’ home, but it was considered Al Seiar’s too until he were to leave to marry, Luvaga said.

The feast put forth by Al Seiar and his family — which also includes two brothers and two sisters, with Al Seiar having been the eldest — included customary lamb slaughtered for guests and served on rice, salads, vegetable and meat stews, chicken, soup and desserts such as baklava and the sweet, cornbread-like basbousa.

Before the meal, there was coffee and dates to eat, and then the students separated by gender — women to dress up with Al Seiar’s mom, the men to learn Emirati dance — before coming back together to eat.

After the meal, the family’s guests were served tea with pastries and at the very end were offered different perfumes to sample or incense.

“This is the side Maktoum wanted us to see,” the part that most travelers don’t, Luvaga said. “That was literally a treat.”

The family did the same thing in 2019, but even after their son’s death and pandemic restrictions, it did not stop them from putting on a feast again in 2021.

While the study abroad group could not visit their home because of the pandemic, Luvaga said Al Seiar’s mom prepared individually-packed meals for each student and had a driver deliver the food — still a spread — for the group to eat in a park.

“Maktoum would have wanted me to do this, so I’m doing it,” Luvaga said of Al Seiar’s mom’s insistence. She said the family is even renovating their home to have more space for hosting in the future.

“We’ve actually become like family,” Luvaga said.

She and Elobeid were devastated by Al Seiar’s death.

“I cried for I don’t know how many days,” Elobeid said. “I just could not believe it.”

She described Al Seiar as warm, kind-hearted and, beside always having a smile on his face, he also “always had a hat on. He loved fedoras.”

They found out after his death that Al Seiar owned 99 fedoras, and as part of honoring him, his parents gave some of the hats away to people who had been part of their sons life or had impacted it.

Elobeid and Luvaga each had one of Al Seiar’s fedoras in their offices — one straw, the other a sort of navy blue and white zebra pattern and well worn.

“I just want people to know there was more than Maktoum” — charming and funny, and they sometimes still get emotional talking about him, because they see his smile and fedora, Luvaga said.

“We needed to honor his memory,” Elobeid said, and they decided upon supporting the cultural exchange that Al Seiar invested so much of himself in with a scholarship to help students participate in the UAE study abroad program who wouldn’t be able to otherwise.

Strengthening bridges

Officials at the Emirati embassy to the U.S. had never known Al Seiar, but after Elobeid and Luvaga reached out to them to inquire about their support of a scholarship in honor of him, they were moved by Al Seiar’s cultural exchange efforts. As a result, they gave almost \$54,000, the professors said — more than the \$50,000 minimum needed to set up an endowed scholarship through the Iowa State University Foundation.

That’s enough to have about \$2,000 available each year — enough to pay for about half of one student’s study abroad costs for the program or support more students with smaller amounts.

Emirati officials did not immediately respond to the Tribune to say what about Al Seiar’s story moved them so much, but Yousef Al Otaiba — the UAE’s ambassador to the United States — said in a news release from the university Foundation that “Maktoum Al Seiar’s passion for sharing Emirati culture with others was truly inspiring. This scholarship will preserve his bright legacy and strengthen the bridges built by Maktoum and all of the future students it will support.”

While at Iowa State, Al Seiar was also a leader — a project officer — in the local chapter of the Tau Beta Pi engineering honor society.

LeVern Faidley, the chapter’s chief advisor, said Al Seiar was involved with outreach activities to middle and high school students and, “We are very pleased that his memory is being honored with an endowed scholarship.”

The application process for the scholarship, which will say something about Al Seiar, will include students having to write an essay that answers how they’ll contribute to being a global citizen and builder of cultural understanding and competency. Students recipients will also be requested to write a thank you letter to Al Seiar’s family after their trip to share how it impacted them and how they benefited from the program.

Luvaga added that two plaques — one at Iowa State and one with Al Seiar’s parents in the UAE — will be updated each year with recipients’ names.

“We wanted Maktoum’s memory here at Iowa State to outlive all of us,” she said.

Elobeid added, “We’re not going to stop,” and that they will continue to add to the endowment on top of what the Emirati embassy contributed.

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