

Professors make a global mark on Madison

BY JEN EYRING '14]



Samy El-Tawab, Integrated Science and Technology

Samy El-Tawab has only been at JMU for two years, but he already has big plans for the future.

El-Tawab, a professor of integrated science and technology, came to JMU in 2012 after earning his Ph.D. in computer science at Old Dominion University. "I used to come visit the Shenandoah Valley, four hours of driving, just to see the beautiful mountains," he says. "To get a job here is really exciting."

He wasn't always so sure that he would have a life here, though. After making the 6,000-mile trek from Alexandria, Egypt, to Virginia, he seriously considered turning back.

"The first six months, especially, were really hard," he says. "You have a complete life in Egypt, you have your friends, you have your connections, and now you're coming here and starting from scratch."

But El-Tawab couldn't be happier with his decision. "People are very friendly," he says, "not only with [holding doors open], but really friendly. If you ask someone about something they will try to give you as

much information as they can."

El-Tawab wants to offer new courses in ISAT and to get feedback from students to ensure they learn something new. He also likes to share his experiences from Egypt. "Sometimes I tell a story in my class about something that happened in Egypt that will teach you something you will not learn from an American professor," he says.

Outside of the classroom, El-Tawab is working with three undergraduates to create a mobile application that will allow students to find open parking spots on campus.

"By the end of the project, the app should not only tell you whether or not a lot is full, but will also give you options for lots that are close and available," says junior ISAT major Robert Spinosa. "I am glad for the opportunity to be a part of this project and see the process from idea to creation to implementation."

Spinosa says working with El-Tawab is like working with a friend. "He's always in a good mood, likes to get down to business, and has some great life

Integrated Science and Technology professor Samy El-Tawab (center) chats with ISAT students about his experiences.

stories. He brings a more global perspective to whatever we do."

El-Tawab says he is impressed with the work Spinosa and the other students are doing. "The quality of students at JMU is really high. I can compare a student's quality here with master's students [elsewhere]. So you can imagine a student in their senior year at JMU is really disciplined, active and really wants to learn."

For this, and other reasons, El-Tawab encourages other international professors to come to JMU. But he offers one piece of advice: "Try not to stay in your office and in your lab and just work. Be social, try to go out."

El-Tawab was also able to meet new people through social events hosted by the Office of International Programs, the same office that helped him secure his visa and file paperwork for his green card.

Thanks to his friends, students and a strong desire to make a difference at JMU, El-Tawab no longer thinks about turning back.

"I feel at home," he says.

Ehsan Ahmed, Economics department

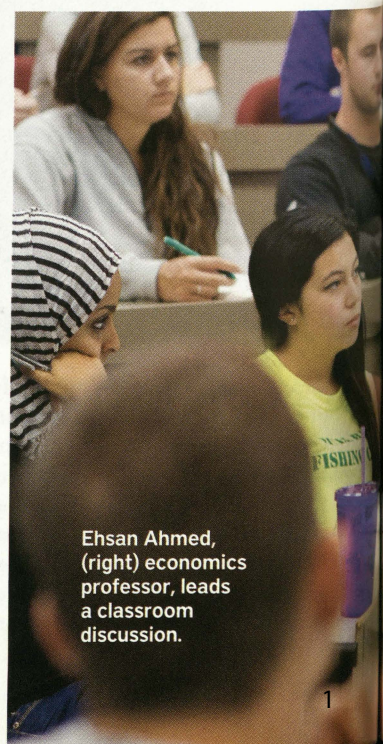
Ehsan Ahmed came to the United States in 1975 unsure if he would ever be successful. Thirty years, thousands of educated students and the creation of an entire Islamic community later, it's clear that he has indeed made a difference.

When Ahmed, now head of the JMU Department of Economics, left Pakistan and made the more than 7,000-mile journey to the United States, he had to leave his family and friends behind.

"I didn't know anyone," he says. "I created my own world ... it took a while."

This world centered around academia during his time at Roosevelt University and Michigan State University, where he earned both a master's degree and a Ph.D.

But when he came to Harrisonburg he had to fight a little harder to create a place for himself. "In 1983, when I came here, you could look at the telephone book and



Ehsan Ahmed, (right) economics professor, leads a classroom discussion.

there would be one Ahmed in the whole region," he recalls.

Not only were there fewer ethnic groups than Ahmed was used to, but there were also less people in general. The population of Harrisonburg in 1983 was slightly more than 26,000. The population of Lahore, Pakistan, where he grew up, was estimated at almost 3.5 million.

"When I came here JMU was half its [present] size," Ahmed says. "Harrisonburg was the smallest place on the planet for me."

Ahmed decided to spark a change in the community.

He teamed up with about 20 families in the area who shared his Islamic faith and started thinking about developing an organization and building a mosque. "We were a small community," he says. "It was just a dream at the time."

But in 1997–98 Harrisonburg saw a large influx of Muslims who were coming here to escape the persecution of Saddam Hussein. Suddenly, they had the manpower necessary to make their dreams a reality.

"We didn't have a lot of money, but we had significant human capital – people who could work," Ahmed says.


With Ahmed's organizational

leadership, the group worked for more than a year to hand-build the mosque that is now the Islamic Center of the Shenandoah Valley.

Ahmed estimates that the once 20-family group has now grown into a 300-family community.

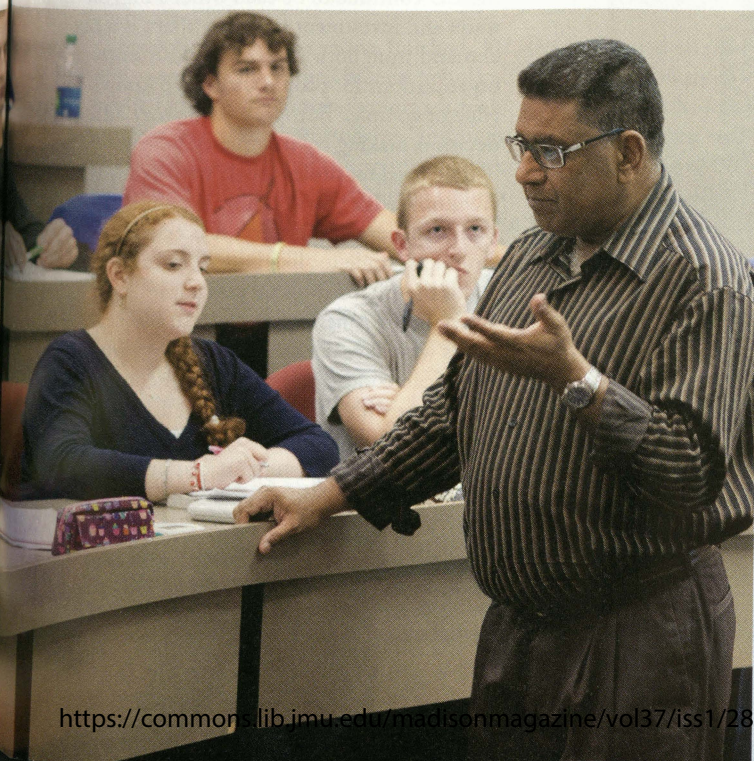
Ahmed says that after 30 years there is a visible difference in both the Harrisonburg and JMU communities because of the efforts from the Islamic Association and a commitment from JMU to bring in more international students and professors. "A student was just talking about taking Arabic classes at JMU," he says. "Ten years ago there were no Arabic classes."

Ahmed believes this is why it's so important that JMU has international professors and students. "People bring in their experiences, and it enhances the quality of education here and quality of life in general."

Kaitlyn Paonessa agrees. A junior international affairs major and student in Ahmed's macroeconomics class, Paonessa says, "I believe that having an international professor at JMU has enhanced my overall experience. International professors bring a new and fresh perspective to the classroom." 

'It enhances the quality of education here and quality of life in general.'

– EHSAN AHMED, *Department of Economics*



Seeing beyond boundaries

Summer enrichment experience in Bolivia confirms importance of a broad world view

BY JAN GILLIS ('07)

Senior Michelle Amaya ('14) came to a full realization of the value of an expansive world-view in an unlikely place – a Bolivian orphanage.

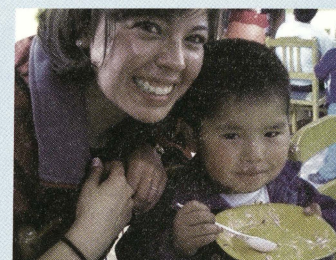
"Since I was a child, I've dreamed of becoming a doctor who helps others abroad," she says; and her academic career has strengthened her passion for the medical field. Amaya won a JMU Hillcrest Scholarship, crafting her proposal to allow her to work through Child Family Health International in La Paz, Bolivia, helping impoverished and at-risk children and adolescents.

Amaya put her fluency in Spanish to good use during her busy days

in Bolivia and found herself drawn to the unreserved, outgoing nature of Bolivians. Mornings were spent accompanying doctors on their rotations. "All were very kind and willing to teach us about what they were doing. I served as a translator for other students who did not know the language." Patients were equally open, ready to share their personal lives with visitors.

Afternoons and early evenings were spent at the orphanage Hogar Jose Soria Para Los Niños, working with orphaned children. Amaya and other student workers hailing from various places around the globe worked together to teach the children about their home countries and customs.

And the children were at the root of Amaya's epiphany. "If I had not had this experience in Bolivia, I never would



have realized the importance of educating children about other countries at an early age," she says.

Amaya noticed that children


at the hospital in La Paz, though having the advantages of living with parents, were not familiar with the world beyond Bolivia's borders.

"When I told them I got my Spanish accent

from El Salvador where I came from, they did not recognize the country's name. They thought perhaps I was referring to another city in Bolivia."

Yet, in similar conversations at the orphanage, children would run to the map and show Amaya where El Salvador was located.

"They had gotten familiar with other countries and ways of living through the multicultural volunteers that came to work there." Learning about other cultures was not simply mastering geography lessons. "They know there's a world out there. They think, 'Maybe I can be a pilot and fly to that country, or maybe I can be a doctor and travel to that country,'" Amaya says.

Seeing beyond boundaries allows children to have aspirations far beyond their circumstances. 

'I saw the importance of teaching kids about the world.'

– MICHELLE AMAYA ('14),
Hillcrest Scholarship recipient