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Reginald T. Dogan: Saudi scouts prove worthy local mentors

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Demarcus Parker learned a lot about Saudi Arabia in preparation for a visit from delegates of the Saudi Arabian Boy Scouts Association.

But Demarcus learned something Friday that he couldn't find in a textbook: One of the delegates taught him the secret Saudi Boy Scout handshake.

"I really liked them," said Demacus, 11. He is a Montclair Elementary School fourth-grader and member of the school's mentoring program. "I'm going to ask my mama to take me there one day."

Demarcus won't be going to the Middle East anytime soon. He might soon forget what country borders Saudi Arabia or the name of the nation's king, but he always will remember the handshake and the man who taught him the secret.

It's these kinds of up-close, personal exchanges that personify the purpose of the International Visitor Leadership program.

Build bridges

For more than 50 years, the Leadership Program has brought leaders and specialists to the United States for firsthand exposure to their professional counterparts and to U.S. society.

The nine Saudi delegates arrived in Pensacola on Wednesday to observe youth-development programs. Their visit was arranged locally by the Gulf Coast Citizen Diplomacy Council, a nonpartisan, nonprofit group that promotes Northwest Florida.

Among other groups, the delegation met with the Boy Scout Troop 10 Court of Honor, visited Catholic High School and took part in a roundtable discussion with Chain Reaction volunteers.

Through exchanges like the International Visitor Leadership Program, we all can help current and future leaders from other nations and different cultures learn from their counterparts in the United States. It helps build bridges of cooperation and understanding, which can lead to improved international relationships.

The delegates, dressed in spiffy army-green slacks with matching berets, scarves and beige shirts, spent time talking to the kids and the mentors at Montclair about the purpose and progress of the program. Some of them spoke in perfect English. Others relied on interpreters.

Melihan S. Al-Melihan said he looks forward to these exchanges so he can give back as much as he receives.

"It's important to forget yourself and think about others," said Al-Melihan, 48, an educational consultant for the Saudi Arabian Boy Scouts. "It's not so much what I'm going to get. It's what I'm going to do."

Besides working with the Boy Scouts, Jameel Mohammad Fallata is a journalist for the Al-Riyadh daily newspaper.

When he returns to Saudi Arabia, there is something more he has to do: "I have to write this story when I get back," said Fallata, 41, laughing.

It should be a story worth telling — and reading.