

FIRST PERSON: International student searches for warmth in America, finds it at BSU

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Correspondent*

As an eighteen-year-old international student, I arrived in Iowa late on a winter night. I remember not being able to breathe or keep my eyes open because of the extreme (at least for me) cold weather. I felt a big change due to coming from a tropical climate [in El Salvador] to a polar climate and it affected me a lot. I was comforted once I got into the school van and experienced a car heater for the first time in my life.

There is no doubt that every international student, from many different nations, cultural backgrounds, religions, and languages, has a different story and experience when they first come to the U.S. with one or two suitcases, one carry-on, and one backpack.

Being only able to bring clothes and maybe some snacks from back home, international students come with a lot of material needs. Moreover, I have also seen that they come with spiritual needs.



After transferring to a warmer climate at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in Hattiesburg, I have been able to get involved and serve with the Baptist Student Union (BSU) for the last three semesters.

Before COVID-19, I enjoyed serving and interacting with international students during 12:01, a free lunch provided by the BSU to students and staff every Thursday at 12:01 p.m. As a member of the International Ministry within the BSU, we thought of ways to reach and help international students during the pandemic.

We were able to partner with organizations and churches from the community that allowed us to help international students with financial needs and provide them with food boxes and meals throughout spring and summer.

By the end of summer 2019, Kathy Pope, a member of the community of Hattiesburg who has helped many international students for a long time, reached out to the BSU to see if we could host in our building a Free Furniture Giveaway for international students. Many months before our first Furniture Giveaway, Miss Pope had been driving her truck to get donated furniture and take it to international students.

In August 2019, we were able to host the first Furniture Giveaway with items that were donated by members of the churches in the community. At USM, the BSU is strategically located next to the International Center, and new international students were having individual meetings to complete admission paperwork on the BSU patio with staff from the Office of International Students and Scholars.

They were able to come into the building and get things they needed such as mattresses, plates, cups, and kitchen utensils.

In January 2021, we were able to host [another] Free Furniture Giveaway. We received a lot more donated items compared to the first time we hosted the event. New international students

were able to furnish their apartments with beds, dressers, desks, chairs, couches, small items, and utensils.



WELCOME TO BSU – International students at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg search for useful items during the Furniture Giveaway ministry that introduces the students to the Baptist Student Union ministry at the school. (Photo credit: USM BSU)

We also had Bibles translated in many different languages, available for free. Being able to serve along members and staff from the BSU has been a great experience, especially to witness how God is working among the students we can help.

I have heard comments from international students such as, “They didn’t do this kind of thing at my previous college,” or “I hope they have something like this when I transfer to a different school.” Those students are so grateful for the things they have received, and many times they ask us to stay and drink tea or invite us for another time to get a meal with them.

Through providing for the material needs for international students, we are also able to build friendships that will ultimately lead us to share our faith in Jesus Christ. Many

times, students ask us why we are doing this, and we can respond that many Christian churches from the community have donated those items because we want to share the love we have found in Jesus.

With that response, international students seem open to hear and learn more about the God we follow. During our first Furniture Giveaway in August 2019, we were able to meet a new international student, and even though he was not a Christian nor ever heard the whole Gospel before, God put curiosity in his heart to learn more about Him.

This student has recently started attending church for a couple of weeks now, and it is evident to many of his new friends at BSU that God is trying to get his attention.

Just this year, January 2021, we have also been witnesses of how God has brought [to BSU] international students who are Christians and have also sought help to get connected to a church in Hattiesburg and get involved with Bible studies at the BSU, or students from different cultural backgrounds who also seem interested in learning more about Jesus and our beliefs.

A couple of weeks ago, along with other members of the BSU, I had the opportunity to visit the apartment of a married couple from South Asia to drink tea and get dinner. The family – a husband, wife who is a new Ph.D. student at USM, and their nine-month-old daughter – is from a Muslim background.

While visiting their home, they were eager to ask about our beliefs and the reason why we help many people. We were able to share the Gospel with them, and the husband said he would be interested in becoming a Christian and wanted to meet more frequently to have more conversations.

It has been amazing to see how God is working through those international students, and I pray that Jesus would be able to reach the nations through those international students.

Escobar is a senior at USM, studying electronics engineering technology. He is serving his campus this year as the leader of USM BSU's International Ministry, and he attends Hardy Street Church, Hattiesburg.

For more information about BSU ministry on the campuses of Mississippi colleges and universities, e-mail mhopper@mbcb.org. BSU is supported by gifts from local churches, the Mississippi Cooperative Program, and the Margaret Lackey Offering for State Missions.

