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Arab American student: GSU allows you to be yourself



As [Governors State University](#) (GSU) recognizes and celebrates Arab American Heritage Month in April, Saad Shalabi feels proud to be in an environment where “you’re allowed to be yourself.”

“It’s nice to be in a place where you can just exist as a person,” said Shalabi, a Palestinian, born in Chicago Ridge, who is slated to graduate with his [Master’s in English](#) next summer.

He came to GSU because it was close to home and it was affordable. He also hoped the university would help him reach his goals of teaching at the community college level, working at a university or pursuing other writing and editing opportunities. But one of the things that makes GSU special to him is the way a commitment to diversity is engrained in the university’s culture and atmosphere.

“I don’t see a lot of people pointing out girls in hijab or guys with religious looking beards; you’re just allowed to be yourself,” he said. “The coolest part is to not have to feel like people are looking at you weird.”

That kind of openness, acceptance and friendliness is illustrated through his interactions with his classmates and teachers, he said, noting some are even curious about his heritage and come to him with questions about it.

“I’ve had people who, when they find out that I am Arabian, say ‘hey I’m curious about this, is it cool if I ask you a question about it’ and I always say absolutely,” he said. “And it’s cool that they ask first rather than just jump right in and assume.”

When asked what Arab American Heritage Month means to him, Shalabi said it’s a time of awareness for those who may have preconceived notions about Arab people.

“They might assume we’re all one religion or we’re like one monolithic culture, so when we have a chance to showcase we can actually show our diversity and our variety and all the different ways we exist and interact with people,” he said.

He also appreciates that it’s a time for Arab people to be seen and recognized, noting that for a while, he didn’t even realize the month existed.

“I was like ‘it’s fine, we’re not a huge population I guess, it’s not on everyone’s radar but at the same time it was like ‘it would be cool if we had a heritage month too,’” he said. “We’re a part of this fabric of society too so it’s nice to get some recognition.”