



Nathan Johnson, left, with classmates in Qatar

photo provided by Nathan Johnson

College in Qatar

By Amanda VanCura

WORK HARD and it will pay off. Growing up, most of us probably heard that quite a bit from parents, teachers, advisors, even friends. However, sometimes it's hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel. As we go through school and conquer each grade, it gets more difficult each year to stay focused on the ultimate goal. We graduate from high school with confidence, and then enter the world of college, where we're a small fish in a big pond, often unsure of where we're going. Yet, all it takes is a belief in yourself and dedication to do a good job and life will present you with some interesting and unusual opportunities. This is what Nathan Johnson, Prosper resident and senior at Texas A&M, discovered.

This fall, Nathan is one of six students from A&M who are spending a semester in Qatar, a small country in the Middle East that borders Saudi Arabia. This new program abroad allows students from A&M to study chemical, electrical,

mechanical or petroleum engineering in an unusual international location.

"Although I don't get to do it very often, I love traveling," says Nathan. "New cultures are fascinating to me. Also, [the university] pays for everything – school, room, books and food. I haven't been paying for the bulk of my college, so I think it's my responsibility to do what I can otherwise to lessen the burden on my parents."

Moving to Qatar for a semester isn't something his parents quite expected.

"He was offered the opportunity to study in Qatar because of his grades, class ranking and passion for mastering his classes," explains Chris Johnson, Nathan's dad. "We had some hesitancy early on, as Qatar is an Islamic country. However, when Nathan decided he would go to A&M, we knew it was the right place at the right time for him. Similarly, we feel this opportunity is the right thing for him, right now. We are still

concerned, but Nathan is now an adult and making a lot of his own decisions."

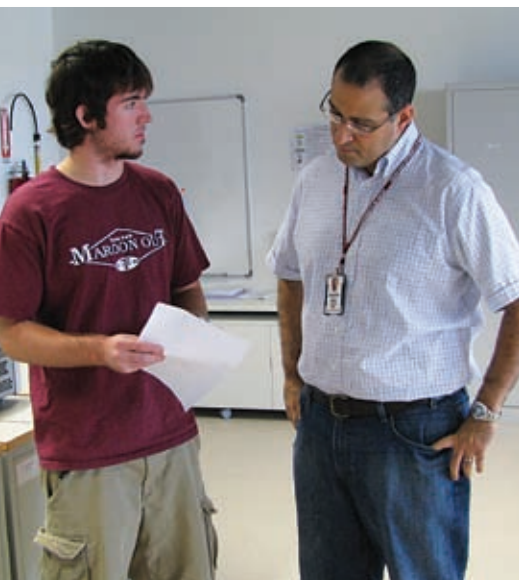
Belief in yourself and dedication to do a good job and life will present you with some interesting and unusual opportunities.

THE ROAD TO QATAR

Nathan has always been a very focused, dedicated student. Around sixth grade, he decided he wanted to be a lawyer. As he moved through his academic career at Legacy Christian Academy, he continued



Nathan's send off with mom, Becky Johnson (top); Qatar compound (middle); Nathan with Dr. Mazen Abdul-Rahman Saghir (bottom)
photos provided by Nathan Johnson



to pursue this desire and started doing research on different types of attorneys.

"I found that intellectual property attorneys have, by far, the most time to spend with their families since they have to go to court the least," says Nathan. "Engineering is highly valued for patent attorneys as they are better able to understand the products and inventions they are writing patents for."

Once Nathan decided on a major he then had to choose a college. For parents and students, this is an overwhelming decision.

"College is expensive; it's not a four-year ticket to a country club," says Mr. Johnson. "Students should work with their parents to find their niche, their passion."

Nathan had found his passion and he discovered a college that excels in it.

"A&M has an outstanding record in all aspects of engineering – especially electrical," he states. "Additionally, I loved the atmosphere and the traditions that A&M holds sacred."

Although Nathan has always been a very determined student, he has faced some challenges while in college. In the beginning, he had difficulties understanding some of his professors who spoke with strong accents. He overcame this obstacle through communication with his professors, study groups and studying on his own. Nathan continues to be an extremely focused student. His parents and professors agree that he knows what he wants and is doing what it takes to accomplish his goals.

"Nathan is every teacher's dream and nightmare, all at the same time," says Mr. Johnson. "He is extremely focused and riveted to not just the content, but obtaining a thorough understanding of the concepts – as thorough as the professor. When it comes to his grades and classes, there is no messing around."

Dr. Takis Zourntos, assistant professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at A&M comments that Nathan is one of

his highest achievers. He believes Nathan is the perfect candidate for the Qatar study abroad program.

"Nathan's people skills, plus the fact that he cares about what he's doing, will be invaluable," comments Dr. Zourntos. "He listens and relates to people and I think he's a good candidate to bridge cultural differences and make friends. Somebody knew what they were doing when they sent Nathan out there!"

LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

When Nathan was preparing for his journey to Qatar, he had a vision in his mind of what to expect as far as his academics were concerned.

"I am taking 17 hours of regular classes, so I will still be able to graduate on time, but the unique experience I will get is the most important to me," he explains. "As far as I can tell, the only thing different will be a week-long orientation before classes begin. After that, I will be attending the A&M school in Qatar just like in College Station."

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His parents have a bit of a different picture of what life will be like when he arrives at his new college home.

"More than anything else, [I think] he will be forced to abide by a lot of new rules and regulations, some of which do not make sense to him," says Mr. Johnson. "He will learn to adapt and be successful under a different set of circumstances. This experience will make him more valuable to a future employer."

Nathan left for Qatar on August 3rd and one of the first things he noticed was the heat. The average temperature is 120 degrees and is "definitely something you have to get used to," according to Nathan. The other major challenge he

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facéd immediately was the language barrier.

“I have to have friends who speak Arabic with me almost all the time when I go shopping or to the mall,” he says. “A lot of times, the people outside the Qatar Foundation (the name of the complex with all the universities) speak little or broken English.”

As far as his classes, Nathan has noticed a bit of change as well. Three of his classes only have seven people and the professors are much stricter about attendance. However, the academic aspect of college has always been the part in which Nathan has excelled. He has also continued his practice of putting countless hours into his studies. So much so, he slightly regrets not getting more involved socially.

He’s been challenged in college, and is currently having the experience of a lifetime; it all started with the habits he developed while in high school.

“Looking back, I think I spent far too much time focusing on grades and not enough time on the college experience as a whole. I now fully realize what an opportunity this is and plan to take full advantage of it,” explains Nathan. “This includes likely trying out for the Texas A&M Qatar basketball team and, at times, sacrificing grades a bit to further my experience here.”

His dad agrees that every college student needs that balance during his or her college career.

“There are times when we wish he would’ve spent more time enjoying the whole college experience as opposed to studying nearly all the time,” says Mr. Johnson. “We believe in the importance of balance. However, his academic drive has probably helped him stay out of trouble.”

*Nathan on the Texas A&M campus
photo provided by Nathan Johnson*

HIGH SCHOOL ADVICE

It’s never too early to start thinking about the future. According to the Johnsons, one of the most important things is to find your passion.

“Nathan’s drive is internal – his field of study fits his passion and gifts,” explains his father. “Everyone knows what it’s like to be in a job you don’t like. It’s far better to look forward to coming to work because you love what you do. Nathan’s eyes light up when he explains some of the different things he has learned and researched.”

The key is to research the possibilities. Whether you’re interested in law, math, science, medicine... the array of opportunities are endless. For high school students, it starts with knowing your niche.

“Be creative in planning your career and, working backwards, the ideal educational path to get there,” says Dr. Zourtos. “Some of the education comes in the classroom, but there is often a practical component, too, that comes from real-life experience.”

No matter what a student chooses to do, high school is a key component in the path to their future.

“Your school work now does matter in the long run – not just your grades, but all the study skills and people skills students are learning will pay off when life gets serious in college,” says Mr. Johnson. “There are more distractions in college... become a top student now to be a top student later.”

Nathan agrees that high school is a stepping-stone to becoming a successful college student – no matter what you choose to be. Even though he’s been challenged in college, and is currently having the experience of a lifetime; it all started with the habits he developed while in high school.

“It’s definitely a challenge, even for me,” comments Nathan. “The more you push yourself, the greater things you can achieve.”

Amanda VanCura is a freelance writer living in Frisco.



Study Abroad Facts

OVER THE PAST decade the number of students studying abroad has increased by 150 percent.

Only 7.5 percent of students studying abroad are foreign language majors. A greater number of students have majors in social sciences, business fields, humanities and arts.

The United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, China and Ireland are among the top ten study abroad countries for U.S. students.

(Source: Institute of International Education: Open Doors 2007 report)