



Ewha Womans University president Lee Bae-yong explains the history of Gyeongbok Palace to students in Seoul on Wednesday. Park Hae-mcok/The Korea Herald

Students forging ties overseas

By Robert Lee
Korea Herald intern reporter

A group of students gathered at a gate of Gyeongbok Palace in Seoul on Wednesday. What made them stand out, besides their uniform purple shirts, were their youthful and eager faces.

The students, some of the brightest minds from the United States and Korea, listened intently as Lee Bae-yong, president of Ewha Womans University, explained the history of the palace built shortly after the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) was founded.

The palace tour was part of a collaborative study abroad program between Ewha Womans University and Harvard University.

"I don't think there is any program like this," said Kim Eun-mee, professor at the Ewha Womans University Graduate School of International Studies. Kim and Carter Eckert, professor of

Korean history at Harvard University, sat down in 2003 and talked about a new course that they both had in mind.

They noticed that Hallyu was increasing in popularity and "thought it would be very wonderful to learn about this," according to Kim. Hallyu is a term used to refer to the growing popularity of Korean culture around the world.

So they set up a program where Harvard and Ewha are "truly equal partners," envisioning the course together. "Professors at both campuses are involved in the designing of the courses," said Kim.

While participating in the program, each Korean student is assigned a dorm room with a student from the United States.

"We made sure we're almost equal in numbers so nobody outnumbers the other and they live in the dorms, even the Korean

students. They become language buddies to teach each other their respective language and culture," explained Kim.

So how did the students view the program and each other?

"I didn't really know much about Korea at all before I came here," said Ashton Howard, a senior majoring in statistics at Harvard University. She minors in East Asian studies.

Others were Korean Americans, curious about their heritage. Eric Choi, a sophomore, said, "The last time I came here was when I was three so I don't have any memories of it."

And a few wanted another taste of Korean culture. "I just thought I'd apply again and see if I could come back and continue the Korean that I started last summer," said Allan Hsiao, a sophomore studying economics.

Though learning English
Continued on Page 14

Students

From Page 3

and Korean, their focus was also on culture. "They do a lot of extra-curricular activities other than studying, but for us studying and getting a job is our main purpose," said Park So-hyun, a junior studying international studies at Ewha Womans University.

Other discoveries proved something of a culture shock. "In Korea, guys cannot enter a girl's dorm room, but in the case of the Harvard students, they are really free to come and go. I was very

surprised," said Kim Na-hyun, a freshman studying business administration.

In the end, students realized that they were the same, and developed meaningful friendships. "I feel like we're all friends and they've been incredibly helpful," said Howard.

"I think all of us are pretty tight knit," said Laura Kim, a Korean American.

Explaining the goals of the program, Ewha President Lee said: "Letting the future world leaders learn about the good aspects of Korean culture is the most important goal, but also sparking the students' interests in what they wish to do in the future."

Through the program, professor Kim said, students who had not been interested at all in Korea found the country to really be an exciting and interesting place.

"We've seen many students start a double major or switch their major," said Kim.

The tour of the Gyeongbok Palace ended with President Lee giving a message to the students about the importance of knowledge and wisdom in foreign affairs. With programs like this, it doesn't seem far-fetched to believe that students walking out of universities now will have that knowledge.

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