

UTA: A 'Big Howdy' to international students

October 20, 2014

The room reached a sweltering temperature as hundreds of bodies moved and collided in circles, jumping and swaying to traditional Indian dance steps. The sounds of drums, violins and melodic pitches filled the room. The DJ played a current Indian pop song, and the crowd roared.

The room looked like a musical number from a Bollywood movie come to life. Sweat mixed with condensation from the overtaxed air conditioning system accumulated on the ceiling beams and dripped onto the heads of the dancers below, unbeknownst to them. The room felt like a sauna, fogging eyeglass lenses upon entering the room.

It's India, right? Nope. It's the University of Texas at Arlington's "Big Howdy," a welcome party for international students.

Every semester, several Christian organizations on the UTA campus band together to welcome incoming international students through a myriad of activities called the Big Howdy. Because Arlington does not have public transportation, we work together with the Indian society on campus to pick students up from the airport and bring them to campus.

600 students, 100-degree heat

This year, more than 600 students received free transportation and a warm welcome. Warm not only because it was 100 degrees or more, but also because of the attitudes and the love expressed by the volunteers who were there to greet the students as they arrived in the United States, many for the first time. In addition to the airport pickups, the Big Howdy also included rides to a discount store, a used-item sale where students could

pick up needed furniture and household items cheaply, and a tour of the DFW Metroplex.

The Big Howdy party is the biggest—and most fun—culmination of these welcome events. Members of local churches prepare food, donate money to buy dozens of pizzas, and come to meet students from all over the world. A dance teacher instructs students how to do the Texas two-step, and the night always ends in a giant Indian dance party with traditional Bollywood moves. The overall goal of this party is to welcome international students to our campus and to extend friendship and hospitality to them. This year we met more than 1,000 new friends.

‘Persons of peace’

The international student enrollment for this fall semester is much higher than in previous years, particularly the Indian population. With the increase of students, there is an increase of persons of peace. A person of peace communicates openness to the gospel, inviting you into his or her life and into his or her community. We met many of these people through the Big Howdy events. Already God is working in the hearts of these persons of peace as two have professed faith in Christ.

My prayer over the summer was for one friend with whom I could share Christ. God answered that prayer by giving me many more friends who want to meet regularly to discuss spiritual matters or study the Bible. My prayer for them and for the rest of the international community is Psalm 34:8: “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.”

Please join me in praying that these students would get a taste of how good the Lord is and hunger for more.