Employee Takes Message of Independence to Syria | CPD

Sachin Pavithran, center, with Damascus University and LDS Charity representatives.

In a recent trip to Syria, CPD employee Sachin Pavithran carried a message of independence to administrators at Damascus University, where a career management center has been set up to serve students with disabilities. “My role was to show that someone with a disability could be valuable to the university,” he said. Pavithran is one of a team of CPD employees who are working with LDS Charities, which donates assistive devices—like wheelchairs and white canes—to people with disabilities worldwide. Pavithran went with charity representatives to offer a curriculum that could enhance the services offered by the Career Management Center at Damascus University. The trip was financed by LDS Charities and was part of a collaborative effort between LDS Charities and the CPD. The CMC offers employment services to all Damascus University students who may be seeking employment. The curriculum introduced by the team would enhance those services to students with disabilities. “During our meetings we had people from the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Labor,” Pavithran said. “The president of the university and the different folks we met were very enthusiastic.” The trip highlighted similarities and differences in how societies deal with disability, but one universal obstacle is stigma. Pavithran has felt its effects on people in different corners of the world—and in himself. A person with impaired vision, he uses a white cane to get around independently, but he hasn’t always been comfortable with it. People with impaired vision—Americans, Syrians, Egyptians—tend to worry about what others might think when they see someone using a white cane. It seems like an obvious tip-off that the cane’s user has a disability. Pavithran saw some hesitation in Cairo, where the team he went with stopped on the way to Damascus. LDS Charities donated 500 white canes there and called on Pavithran to demonstrate how to use them. Some of the people he talked to there were worried that the canes would bump into too many people and objects in a crowded city like Cairo. He remains convinced that a white cane is a step toward independence. With good technique, a user can move around safely, without relying on a guide. “A lot of people struggle. I just tell them, ‘What’s more important? Falling and breaking your nose or worrying about what other people think?’” Likewise, American employers may feel hesitant to hire people with disabilities. That same hesitation exists in other parts of the world, where employers may worry that an employee with disabilities may be a liability risk. The hesitation exists in academia, too. Some university students with disabilities in Damascus were given study materials and told to do their work at home. But the Career Management Center at Damascus University appeared ready to offer more services to students with disabilities, Pavithran said; he was impressed with the university president’s interest and willingness. In the evenings Pavithran was off-duty, but the message continued as he went out and explored the old city. He grew up in the Middle East, in Dubai, but Syria is a new favorite. He loved Damascus. It was truly an exchange. The BYU students he was with kept telling him, “Everyone is looking at you.” He was stopped a lot, too. Maybe it was the white cane with the business suit, but Pavithran was happy to talk—and to eat the local fare. “The food was the best,” he said.