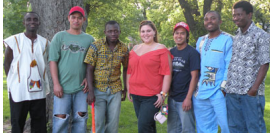


Holyoke is home to exchange workers

Written by Darci Tomky



“It’s a really great experience,” sums up the opportunities that Morgana Silva, Emmanuel Opoku Yeboah, Chris Ansu Gyeabour and Williams Besong have had in Holyoke the past several months. They are four of 10 workers from all over the world who are currently employed at Seaboard Foods through the Worldwide Farmers Exchange (WFE).

A native of Ghana, Africa, Yeboah explained he wanted to come to America to learn more about a different style of farming, gain experience and improve how they are doing things in Africa.

“It’s a good thing to travel abroad and have that exchange experience,” said Besong who came to Holyoke from Cameroun.

WFE gives them that opportunity. The program was organized to give workers a chance to improve agricultural skills while experiencing a different culture by living and working in another country. Applicants choose from a number of specific agriculture industries and then are placed in available jobs across the United States.

Kelly Drees of Seaboard Foods said they looked into the WFE program when they were shorthanded 18 months ago. The WFE administrates the J1 Visa and arranges everything for the workers to live and work in the U.S. for about one year.

With 12 total exchange employees to date, including workers from Ghana, Cameroun, Brazil, Ukraine, Russia and the Philippines, Drees noted they hope to continue the program in the future. “They are a good asset to the company,” he said.

Gyeabour was very impressed with Seaboard, noting it is a big company compared to what he is used to in Ghana.

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As part of the program, Seaboard tries to expose the exchange workers to every area of production. They get to spend time in all areas with extra time in their favorite areas.

“They want us to achieve our goals,” said Besong. Seaboard is very good with training workers, he said, and he is very comfortable with his coworkers which makes the job nice and not stressful. “I appreciate the way they handle us.”

Silva noted it was hard to adapt to the work at Seaboard. “I never had to work so hard or wake up so early,” she said. Accustomed to being the boss at jobs in Brazil, Silva had to get used to the rules and accountability at Seaboard. “The best thing is the internal growth,” she said.

Having grown up in large cities, Holyoke was certainly an adjustment for the foreigners. Needless to say, they all agreed Holyoke now feels like home.

“Everybody’s just nice. It makes it feel like home,” said Besong. Gyeabour emphasized the community really accepted them, and people are willing to talk to them and teach them new things.

“People want to learn more about us and our culture,” said Yeboah. He noted people are very approachable, and Holyoke is a good farming community.

The exchange workers have gotten involved in the community through activities including attending church and singing in the worship band as well as joining the many soccer games in the park and going to the movies.

Silva had never seen snow before coming to Holyoke, and she noted she was especially scared of tornados upon arriving in Colorado. In her first week in Holyoke, the fire whistle blew. Silva and a few of the other exchange workers thought it must be a tornado and therefore proceeded to gather their belongings, run out of the apartment and call 911. They laugh about it now and have yet to experience a real tornado, but they have surely accumulated an endless amount of first-time experiences during their time in Holyoke.

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Apart from all the cultural experiences, the workers are excited to take new swine production knowledge back to their home countries. They all had upper level agricultural education before coming to work at Seaboard, including degrees in veterinary medicine and science agro-technology, but the first-hand experiences in America will be priceless.

WFE programs are usually one year long, but many have chosen to extend their time here by taking college classes in addition to working at Seaboard.

Besong will spend two years total in the United States, having spent time in Fairbury, Neb. with the WFE before relocating to Holyoke. "I don't know my limit but I just want to go. I'm not satisfied with my level right now," he said. "When you get more knowledge, you get more opportunities."

"Once knowledge is acquired, nobody can take it from you," said Gyeabour. He and some of the others plan to continue their master's degree education upon returning home. They also mentioned the possibility of starting their own companies in the swine industry. It takes time, but you have to start somewhere, said Gyeabour.

Drees noted the exchange program is designed to give workers education and understanding and then send them back to their own country to use that information to improve and upgrade swine production.

Besong is excited to go home and try to change the way people operate their farms by training them with the new, modern techniques he has learned in America. "It's not just about me—it's about helping people in my community," he said. With a more efficient way of doing things, the small farms can increase production, hire more employees and will benefit the community as a result.

Even though they pictured themselves "living on the farm in the middle of nowhere," the WFE exchange program at Seaboard Foods in Holyoke has been a lifechanging experience for several workers from around the world. "I've never regretted being here," said Besong, and he thanks God for the opportunity.

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