

Pyeongtaek University offers Headstart Program to USFK personnel, employees, dependents

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Professor Bae Seo-hyun stands with participants of the Headstart Program at the campus of Pyeongtaek University in Gyeonggi Province, Oct. 5. Courtesy of Bereket Alemayehu

By Bereket Alemayehu

On the morning of Oct. 5, about 25 Americans were busy learning basic Korean language, culture and local living information as part of the Headstart Program provided by Pyeongtaek University in Gyeonggi Province.

The two-day program is being run 20 times for U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) personnel, civilian military employees and their family members, until November. Since 2006 when the university signed a memorandum of understanding with the Eighth U.S. Army, it has offered the Headstart Program about 414 times, helping a total 17,400 Americans adjust to life and strengthening the USFK's acculturation capabilities in Korea.

Professor Bae Seo-hyun, director of the university's International Exchange Cooperation Center, told The Korea Times that the program provides Korean language, history and culture courses for the USFK personnel to improve their understanding of Korea, assist them in adapting to Korean society and expand communication opportunities with Koreans.

"This year, we have prepared more systematic classes for the 70th anniversary of the Korea-U.S. alliance," she said. "I believe that providing Korean language classes and cultural lectures will be a stepping stone to the newcomers and Army members, as well as it will strengthen the Korea-U.S. alliance."



Participants of the Headstart Program pose at Pyeongtaek University in Gyeonggi Province, Oct. 5. Courtesy of Bereket Alemayehu

The program includes classes, field trips, team activities and other events held in and around Pyeongtaek, Suwon, Seongnam and Dongducheon in Gyeonggi Province. The university hosts participants located at U.S. Army Garrison (USAG) Humphreys and Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek, and also sends instructors up north to Camp Casey in Dongducheon and K-16 in Seongnam.

"I would suggest that soldiers take this opportunity, especially for those newcomers first time stationed in Korea, of participating in such courses and activities," said Army Sergeant First Class Juliet Mendonez, who is participating in the current program with her husband and their children. "Even though this is my third time coming to Korea, learning the culture with my husband is awesome. I love the culture, Koreans are rooted in their culture. One of the most amazing aspects is, in many places, Korea is very safe to be out, even for family. The food is amazing, which is usually prepared fresh, and mobility in Korea is so easy and impressive."



Army Sergeant First Class Juliet Mendonez, right, and her husband Denmark pose with two of their children at Pyeongtaek University in Gyeonggi Province, Oct. 5. Courtesy of Bereket Alemayehu

"It was our first time as a family relocated here," said Denmark Mendonez, Sgt. Mendonez's husband. "Our oldest 24-year son is on active duty in the U.S. Army too. The program helps to familiarize with what to do, which places to go and the culture part as well."

They had just attended a lecture on local living information by Lee See-hwa, a professor of urban and real estate development. "When you are out and unsure of the transport usage or finding locations, asking local people for information is more important rather than relying on electronic devices," Sgt. Mendonez said, summarizing what she learned.

The curriculum touches on important day-to-day information such as using public transportation and traffic rules, as well as offering visits to historic sites and local markets, and participating in events such as folk games cooking classes. Language training is also a core part of the program.

"It's been interesting so far, however, trying to learn another language is a bit challenging, to know the basics of the language, how to say hello and thank you, then routinely it becomes normal," said Army Sergeant First Class Carlos Santiago, who joined the program after a friend recommended it. "I have had Korean food many times during the program. I was enjoying learning about and making kimbap and bibimbap."



U.S. Army Sergeant First Class Carlos Santiago poses at Pyeongtaek University in Gyeonggi Province, Oct. 5. Courtesy of Bereket Alemayehu

The university has planned a homecoming day in late November at its arts auditorium featuring a concert as well as a presentation of certificates to the participants.