

'The atmosphere was really spiritually uplifting': Young Baha'i Faith member reflects on year of service in Israel

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Sam Wiley stands in his home on August 15. / Staff photo by Wyatt Massey

Sam Wiley worked night shift more than 6,000 miles from home. He worked morning and evening shifts, too, patrolling the grounds of one of his faith's most holy places.

For a year, Wiley's long hours of security work at the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel, were not just a job for the 19-year-old. The hours were in service.

Wiley is a member of the Baha'i Faith, which emphasizes the role of service. Weeks after graduating from McCallie School in 2018, Wiley moved to Haifa in northern Israel to spend a year volunteering at the Baha'i World Centre, the administrative and spiritual capital of the religion.

Spending a year volunteering had long been in the back of Wiley's head, he said. Previously, he had gone on short-term service trips abroad to Indonesia and St. Lucia.

In Israel, Wiley worked on the center's security team, checking visitors' bags, answering questions and patrolling the grounds of the center, which include a series of garden terraces, administrative buildings and a shrine to the faith's founder. Some of the visitors were tourists, drawn to the beauty of the gardens. Other visitors were members of the faith, coming as pilgrims to the center.

What is the Baha'i Faith?

The Baha'i Faith believes in the unity of all people over time through the world's various religions. In the faith, God reveals understanding to people at various times through prophets from other religions, such as the Buddha, Muhammad and Jesus. The religion was founded in Iran by Bahá'u'lláh in the mid-19th century and is followed by around 7 million people today.

Baha'is have been in the Chattanooga area since the 1940s, said Andrew Lefton, secretary for the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Chattanooga. The local assembly incorporated in 1975 and has around 100 members from Hamilton, Bradley and Marion counties, he said.

"I'd always seen pictures of the terraces and the Shrine of the Bab but being there, the terraces were so much bigger than I thought they were," Wiley said. "The terraces stretched the entire mountain. Just the beauty of the place, the atmosphere of being there was really spiritually uplifting."

Service is one of the highest tenets in the Baha'i Faith, said Andrew Lefton, secretary for the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Chattanooga. Being a servant is not viewed as a diminished role.

"The notion of service in the faith is not the usual notion of being a servant," Lefton said. "... In the Baha'i Faith, it's considered the highest attainment to be in service to others, to help people live better."

Wiley grew up in the faith. Being able to live in one of the religion's holiest places was incredible, he said.

"Having access to the shrines all the time was a real blessing," he said. "And just being there and working and knowing that I was directly helping the Baha'i Faith by helping to secure it was a really nice experience."

However, the security work was physically taxing. Wiley had to transition from a series of night shifts to morning shifts without a break. After a while, his body got used to sleeping whenever it could, Wiley said.

Experiencing the high security environment of Israel and the ongoing Israel-Palestine tensions was jarring, too, he said.

"You would see armed guards outside of malls, outside of religious places," Wiley said. "It was really different, as an American, to go there and see that because we're used to relative safety here. But the whole time I was in that country, there was a feeling like the security is here because they need to be here."

Working at the center also allowed Wiley to interact with a variety of people, from visitors to fellow volunteers. Over his year, only three of his more than a dozen roommates were from North America. The exposure to different ideas and actions changed his worldview, he said.

"The whole time I was there, it was this gradual absorption of other people's cultures. And it's really nice because being in that environment, you really get to see how different and how nice it is that there is so much difference and diversity in the world," Wiley said.

The experience motivates Wiley to seek out more diversity since he returned from Israel in June.

"What I do with my life, I want to be able to help people with," he said.

Wiley is planning to attend Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, for a career in medicine, he said.