

ASU student abroad in Brussels during ISIS bombing

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HICKORY – Appalachian State University student Josh Wharton arrived in Brussels this morning expecting nothing but another day of sightseeing in Europe during his time studying abroad.

He arrived in Brussels by bus at approximately 7 a.m. local time, or about 2 a.m. EDT, to the lodging he'd be staying in. He walked to the lodging and waited about a half hour for his hosts to let him and a friend he'd been travelling with in.

Around the time Wharton was shown his room, bombs were going off in the city at the airport and two metro stations – one of which was just two kilometers from where he was staying.

“(Our host) showed us our room and we sat down and talked about what we wanted to do,” Wharton said.

“Then, one of the other women living here walks out of her room and says something to my friend. I didn't hear the first part of it, but I heard her say that she hoped no one was hurt but was wondering if she'd be able to fly to Israel in a few like she had planned. Then I hear her say to the woman that let us in that two bombs went off in the airport.”

Wharton said that it was surprising how calm and casual the women sounded when discussing the attacks.

“Even after they heard that people had died, and after the bombs went off on the metro, they were still eerily casual about it,” Wharton said.

But another stunning aspect for Wharton was that he and his friend almost flew to Brussels rather than taking the bus.

“I told him I wouldn't fly though because it was too expensive,” he said. “We could have potentially been in the airport at that time, or on the way there. It's just odd to think of that.”



ASU Brussels Attack

Appalachian State University student Josh Wharton arrived in Brussels before the terrorist attacks at approximately 7 a.m. Tuesday.

When he applied to Keele University in the United Kingdom where he is studying abroad, Wharton was asked to write an essay about a current event in Europe. He chose to write about the refugee crisis.

“I had read before coming here that Belgium was supposed to be one of the main countries in Europe for arms trafficking, and many suspected terrorists were thought to be staying here,” he said. “I just didn't expect the lack of shock in the people when something actually happened.

“But I looked outside and, aside from the constant drone of sirens, it seemed to be a normal day for everyone in the area. Even after news got out about all three explosions, there were kids playing out on the playground at what I think is an elementary school nearby.”

Wharton left the house later with his hosts to go buy food before nearby stores closed.

“I was walking about for maybe 15 minutes,” he said. “It looked to me like no one was bothered. Even one of the women I was with said, ‘You wouldn't think there was a terrorist attack today. Everyone's walking about just like normal.’”

Wharton said he thinks if a similar attack had occurred in the U.S., the reaction would be a stark contrast to what he witnessed in Brussels.

He recalled a time in elementary school when a nearby bank was robbed and compared how much more security measures were taken even then.

“We weren't even allowed to sit at our desks, let alone be on the playground,” Wharton said. “The lights would be turned off and all the windows covered and the teacher would crowd us in a corner if we got an alert of some type of danger.

“Brussels is in their highest level for terrorism alert, and kids are playing on playgrounds and people are casually sipping coffee outside of the cafes. Perhaps that's just the area of the city I'm in, and the people in it, but we're oddly close to the metro explosions for that to explain it all.”

Wharton said he plans to leave as soon as possible and that he'll be cautious and responsible, but is doing his best to not be afraid.

“This isn't my home, and I don't know it as well as she does, but I also won't allow someone who doesn't value this city and the people in it to make me afraid of it,” he said.

He says that he thinks the U.S. generally is more fearful of terrorism and foreign enemies.

“I can't speak for the entirety of Europe but look at France and the UK, they're already mobilized military to the borders,” he said. “It seems like the government takes these things extremely seriously, but the people might not.”

What Wharton noticed most about the reactions of people to terrorist attacks – both in their midst and

apart from them – is a certain sense of removal from the situation unless you have directly witnessed it.

“After the Paris attacks, I heard a lot of people in the states talking about how little we truly cared for the European victims – saying it was so easy to throw a French flag filter over your profile picture and put a ‘praying for Paris’ status up,” he said. “There was a lot of talk about how we're cushioned from the reality of the attacks because we're so far away, which makes us cold toward the actual people.”

But even in Brussels today, he says he’s witnessing something similar.

“The people not in the direct vicinity of the bombings don't seem to be concerned too much about the 27-plus dead citizens of their city and the greater amount injured,” he said. “Granted, I think some of them are just trying to keep calm. Like our hostesses, they’re probably not trying to freak out and thus, freak out their guests (us).”

Wharton said he and his friend plan to travel to Prague as soon as possible, rather than returning straight back to the UK, as he said he feels it may be safer to do so.

“They're going to have to do what they did after the Paris attacks, only even heavier this time around,” he said of safety measures being taken by local authorities. “It's best that we're not in the way for that.”

He added that while his views on refugees and immigration haven’t really changed due to the attack, and he is still unsure of the best practices.

“But I think, and hope, this situation will be used to create a more efficient and beneficial form of immigration and travel between the countries within the Schengen zone,” he said. “Having open borders is nice and efficient, but it seems like (in) certain circumstances, such as the current one, things should be altered. It's just such a complex situation and I know I don't have the answers.”

He said he thinks it would be cold for countries to completely close their borders to refugees, as recent talks highlight in the U.S.

“But you also want to keep your country safe from the very few that shouldn't be allowed in and are capitalizing on the crisis,” he said. “I think vigilance and prudence should be the mindset adopted by countries looking to welcome those in need, but not fear. Fear seems like a passive thing to me that leads to separation, while vigilance is active.”

He also worries that certain policies may make it harder for refugees to get the safety they need.

“The many suffer because of the acts of only a few. It's just a horrible situation.

“What happened in Paris showed that it can happen, and so it could happen at any time and anywhere. What happened in Brussels today proved that, even further showing that the current

system isn't working.”