JONESBORO — Two officers from Clayton County who recently traveled halfway around the world to attend public safety and counterterrorism training in Israel were surprised to find many similarities in the police work.

Even with differences in the political and cultural climate and heightened safety concerns Israeli police officers face, Capt. Jason Armstrong of the Forest Park Police Department and Jonesboro Police Chief Franklin Allen said they found successful policing 6,500 miles across the globe is focused on the same core issues as in the U.S. — maintaining the respect and trust of a community and overcoming differences in understanding.

“Before I participated in the program, I thought that that’s all we were going to talk about over there, terrorism,” Armstrong said. “But I was pleasantly surprised … I felt like I was back here in the States with some of the problems that they face over there. The problem with public trust between the police department and the community, that is a big component of what we do over here. We all can relate to that. That was eye-opening for me.”

Armstrong and Allen recently returned from two weeks of intensive training in Israel, studying the latest in advances in counterterrorism, emergency management, and other public safety and homeland security strategies alongside local and Israel Police officers. The two Clayton County officers were among a 20-member delegation of senior law enforcement officers from Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee to participate in the 25th annual Georgia Law Enforcement Exchange (GILEE).

The program is a research unit of Georgia State’s Andrew Young School of Policy Studies. GILEE “works to continuously improve public safety by enhancing inter-agency cooperation and educational training among the world’s top law enforcement communities, with Israel a key partner in this exchange,” according to a program director.

Allen said he’s wanted to take part in the highly competitive program for several years and was looking forward to the opportunity. He, like Armstrong, expected to find stark differences between the law enforcement efforts of the two countries.
“I was surprised to find out it was very similar,” Allen said. He found he had much in common with the Israeli officers, but his counterparts have a “heightened awareness of acts of terrorism.”

Police in Israel deal with lack of public trust, an issue familiar to U.S. law enforcement officers, especially in recent years with the rise of highly publicized officer-involved fatal incidents. Both countries, including agencies in Clayton County, are working to ensure their police forces are representative of the people they serve. In addition, Allen and Armstrong said their departments are implementing community outreach programs to better the relationship between citizens and officers.

Armstrong said he was impressed by the leadership and training programs the Israel Police had developed. It’s something he’d like to implement in his own department to benefit Forest Park officers and improve officer retention.

“That’s one of the struggles with police work, period,” Armstrong said. “We all struggle with the same thing.”

Allen said he’d like Georgia officers to undergo more rigorous training, a change he hopes the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police will initiate across the state within the next few years. For Jonesboro in particular, Allen said he brought back from Israel a renewed commitment to increased visibility and community partnership.

In addition to existing neighborhood watch programs and community classes, he’s considering a Police Explorer program to “bridge the gap” between Jonesboro youth and police officers. He’s also benefited from the relationships forged with fellow Georgia officers on the trip, including Gwinnett Police Chief Butch Ayers. Ayers has since helped Allen to develop the Jonesboro Police Department’s first K-9 unit.

“It’s kinds of like going to boot camp or summer camp, where you go for a short period of time and you just somehow bond, and you’re bonded for life,” Allen said of his new professional contacts. This is true of the two Clayton County officers, who met and were roommates on the trip.

“One of the things we’ve learned in law enforcement is that we’re a lot more effective when we share information and share ideas,” said Armstrong. “Nobody has all the answers, nobody has seen everything. So if you can put a bunch of people in the room from all different places and they all bring their experiences together, it helps everybody.”

For both officers, the trip was not only beneficial professionally but fulfilling personally, as both described their awe in taking in the historical and religious significance of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. Allen spoke highly of the Israeli people and culture, though he doesn’t quite agree with they way they take their Diet Coke. He prefers his chilled with lots of ice, he said.

Differences in soda drinking temperatures aside, Allen and Armstrong said they felt a strong camaraderie with the police officers in Israel and considered their time with the GILEE program highly valuable. Both would recommend the trip.

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Allen said.