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Fall 2015, International Students and Scholars Receive Warm Welcome at Thanksgiving

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UNH Global

International Students and Scholars Receive Warm Welcome at Thanksgiving

Bringing everyone to the table

Tuesday, December 1, 2015

Thanksgiving is one of the most traditional celebrations in the United States. It is a day steeped in history, where families gather to give thanks over an often elaborate meal, share stories and enjoy time together. However, this time of year can be challenging for much of UNH's international population, as the campus empties and most students and scholars do not have connections to experience the festivities.

To help with this, the Office of International Students and Scholars coordinates the

Thanksgiving Dinner Program, which, for the past four years has successfully matched international students and scholars with host families from the Durham community excited to share their holiday meal.

"When someone would talk to me about Thanksgiving, I would imagine all the movies I have seen on TV," recalls Nivea, an exchange student from Brazil. "I remember a scene in A Christmas Carol where the whole family is present and the table is full of food, including the famous dish, turkey." Nivea was thrilled to be included in the Thanksgiving celebration last year.



Barbara White (third from r.) with international guests in her home

Barbara White, Professor in the Occupational Therapy department, has welcomed international students into her home for the past two years. She has hosted Nivea, students from Saudi Arabia and Serbia, and several students from China. Barbara's most memorable experience was when her son went to greet the guests at the door, and he gave Rima a customary big hug in welcome. This surprised Rima; as a Saudi woman, her culture does not permit opposite genders to have close contact. "Rima was good-humored about the whole thing," Barbara recalls, "all the different cultural rules and expectations about young men and women. She was a high-spirited, inquisitive woman and open to lots of conversations so we were able to really get to



Thanksgiving dinner for Barbara White (l. center) and her guests

know each other." Barbara went the extra mile to make Rima feel "at home" by providing her with a prayer rug, so that Rima was able to incorporate her daily religious ritual into the occasion.

Yue (or Jessie) from China also went to Barbara's house for Thanksgiving last year. One thing Jessie noted and appreciated about Thanksgiving dinner with Barbara and her family was the way food brought everyone together. "In Chinese culture, it's not good to have the guests cook because they would consider it as work," Jessie explained. However, Barbara happily included Jessie and other student guests during food preparation, chopping and peeling vegetables, a cultural difference that helped Jessie feel welcome. She said it reminded her of being at home, where she and her family always cooked together. At Barbara's house, everyone was given the opportunity to participate in creating the meal, from setting the table to cleaning up afterwards. They were treated as family rather than guests.

Jovana (or Yoka), a graduate student from Serbia, wanted to do something special for the occasion, so she was excited for the invitation to spend the holiday with Barbara's family. In anticipation of the day, feeling nervous and a bit anxious, Yoka didn't really know what to expect. She was pleasantly

surprised by the warmth and hospitality extended to her and other student guests. From the very first moment, Yoka says, “they made us feel completely relaxed and at ease, as if we were part of their family. Unless you’re an international student, you cannot really know what it’s like to just be so far from home. There are a number of reasons that can make you feel lonely, melancholic, and nostalgic. But then an experience like this can really make you feel like there is home here, too. And, there are people who will really make you feel as close to family as possible.”

The holiday helped Yoka reflect on the meaning of home and family. “Since I’ve been here, I’ve changed my definition of family, and it’s not just your relatives. Family is really people who welcome you into their lives and homes and make you feel accepted and make you feel nice. I believe that counts as ‘family.’”

WRITTEN BY

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