

Program offers international students a cultural link

By Ifrah Jimale

Staff writer

International student services accomplished its ambitious goal for the year: It found a family for every international student through its new program, Friendship Family.

Friendship Family began last summer as a second branch under the CultureLink program. Friendship Family was designed to help international students adjust to a new school and environment.

Through the program, a family and an international student are paired according to preferences. The family picks up the student from the airport and plays host to them for one to four days. The family invites the student back for holidays and family events.

"I never would have thought about the little things that matter quite a bit such as who meet the international students at the airport, who helps

them move in to the residence hall," said Madonna McDermott, a Friendship Family participator and director of student health services and the Wellness Center.

The parents of international students worry about such things, but Friendship Family eases their worries, said Arina Negoda, an international student services intern.

Negoda, a second-year graduate student at St. Thomas and exchange student from Kazakhstan, participated in Friendship Family at the College of St. Catherine. Her family was happy that someone was going to meet her at the airport, she said.

"I got a letter from my friendship family," she said. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me."

There are 345 international students from 66 different countries at St. Thomas. Eighteen are exchange students and they all have host families through Friendship Family.

Before Friendship Family began, Communication Partners was a part of international student services. Forty international students are paired with 40 St. Thomas students through Communication Partners.

Communication Partners provides international students with a guide on campus. A student shows an international student around and answers questions. International student services emphasizes Friendship Family so international students can experience the lives of American families.

"Our office always tries to come up a way to improve the lives of international students," Negoda said.

Experiencing new things for the first time goes for both the student and the family.

"My favorite part of the experience was being able to share Christmas with a student from a culture that does not celebrate this holiday, and how much my daughters enjoy getting to know

someone from another country," said McDermott, who played host to a student from Japan.

Friendship Family offers international students an experience beyond academics. Judy Olson, who played host to a student from Germany and two from Australia, said, "It's fun to show them the Minneapolis/St. Paul area and see their reactions."

The Olsons and their international students have discovered that many things they have read about each other's governments and politics are not correct.

"Through dialogue we are able to dispel some of the myths we have of one another," Olson said.

International student services invites friendship families and their students to participate in various events, such as Homecoming, the international dinner and other events on campus. The duration of the program is a year, or a semester in some cases. International

student services holds a picnic at the end of the school year so families can say goodbye to the students.

Students have 60 days after school is over before they must return to their home country. Some leave for home immediately after school is done; others travel. This year they can stay with their host families. The program does not cost anything and any family in the Twin Cities can participate.

The goal for Friendship Family was achievable because families were excited and learned many things from the students in the program.

"We have learned a great deal of things about the areas of the world that the students came from," Olson said. "We have learned that people are pretty much the same no matter where they grew up. They just see things from a different perspective."

Ifrah Jimale can be reached at ijimale@stthomas.edu