

Couple dedicate lives to international family

By MARY GNIEWEK

Herb and Dorothy Piilo's "family" is spread over three continents.

They have sons and daughters in Japan, South America and Europe — the 14th and 15th members expected in September.

The Piilos, of West Bloomfield, are longtime devotees of Youth for Understanding, an international student exchange program that has placed 65,000 students from 50 countries in its 29-year history.

In the past 12 years, Piilo, a retired administrator in the Detroit public schools, and his wife have opened their home to 14 teen-agers hailing from such places as Yugoslavia to suburban Helsinki.

Each student stays for a year and is to be considered part of the family, not as a guest. That means when the Piilos head for their cottage north of Oscoda on summer weekends, the kids come along.

Before the price of gasoline skyrocketed, their foreign-born children shared trips out west in the family motor home.

In addition, both husband and wife work fulltime on a volunteer basis to promote the organization. Mrs. Piilo is recruitment coordinator in southeastern Michigan. Her husband is placement coordinator for Wayne and Oakland counties.

They place 50 students with Farmington-area families each summer, plan annual get-acquainted parties for each new group, and last year personally sent off 2,000 students from the international terminal at Detroit Metropolitan Airport.

THEY DO IT for the enjoyment and the cultural exchange, they say.

"It's an ideal way for people to find

out what other people are all about," Piilo says.

And it's a great way for their daughter, Elia, 21, an only child, to have brothers and sisters, Mrs. Piilo adds.

Elia, a North Farmington High grad who studied foreign languages at Oakland Community College, is employed as a foreign language messenger at Jervis B. Webb Co. in Farmington Hills. She lives with her parents and the progression of students who share their home.

The Piilos correspond regularly with the Germans, Finns, Swedes and others who have called their place home over the years. Several have returned to visit and the Piilos, who traveled abroad just once more than 20 years ago, vow to return "to visit all our kids, but we'll need a year."

Initially, their interest in Youth for Understanding was ignited by a challenge to take in a boy from Finland who'd been placed on a farm and wasn't adjusting to country life.

"He had some problems and was on his way back to Finland," Piilo said. "We speak Finnish and took the boy as a challenge."

"He loved it. Things worked out fine."

SO FINE THAT the Piilos decided to continue the tradition. This year they played host family to Annika Koistinen, 18, from Finland and Hakan Sjostrom, 19, from Sweden.

Sjostrom attended Cranbrook Institute and lived with the Piilos on weekends only. Annika spent a semester each at North Farmington and Harrison.

Both move about the house casually, doing assigned chores, answering the telephone, relaxing on summer break until they return to their real homes in a couple of weeks.

"It's hard to believe the year is gone," Annika said. "It will be strange to leave."

The Piilos have portraits of each student in a variety of frames and folders that Mrs. Piilo promises to standardize and hang on the living room wall one day soon.

"It gets easier for us each year to open our home, but the hard part is saying goodbye," Piilo said. "A piece of you goes with them."



HERB PIILO



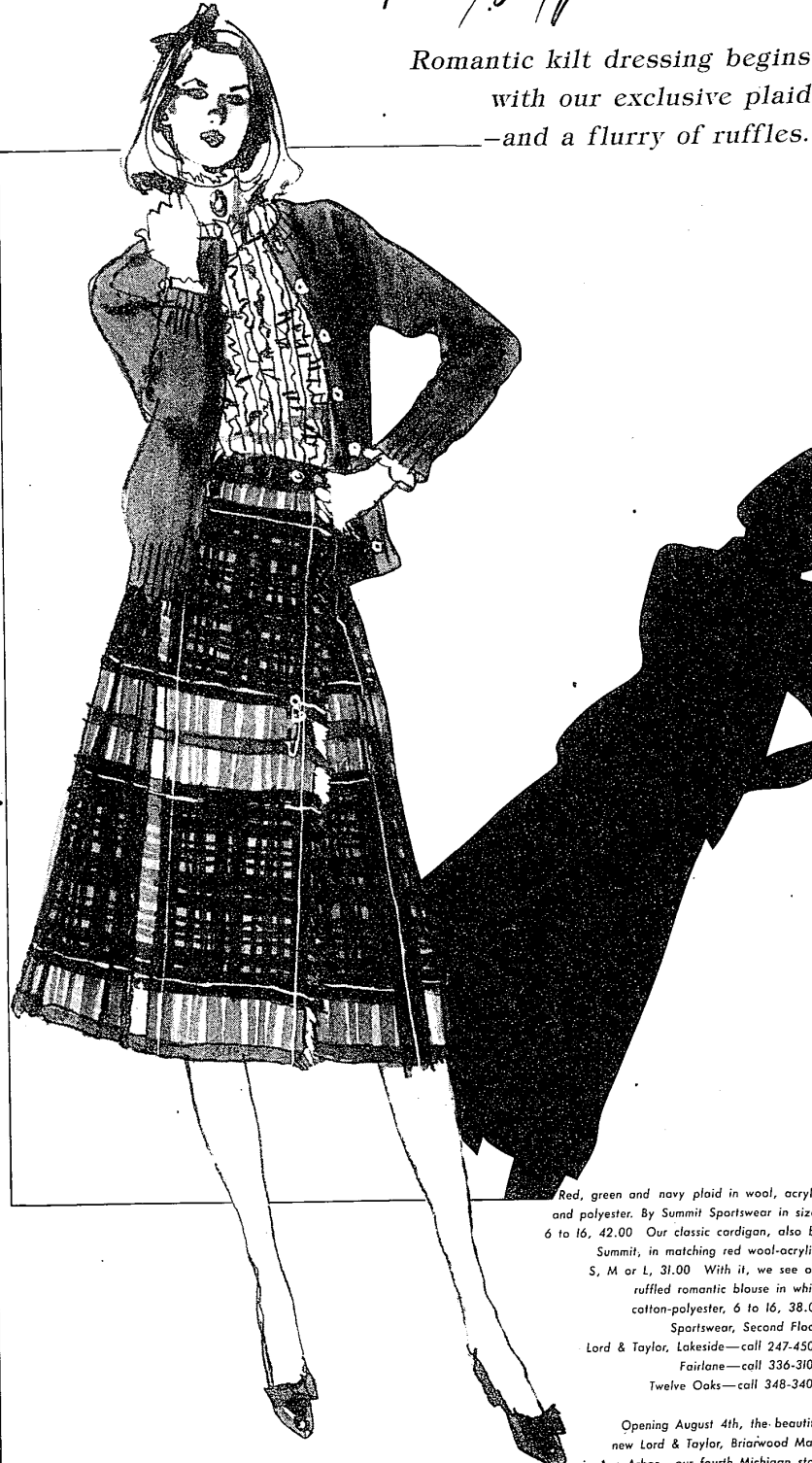
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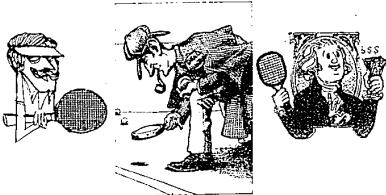
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