

Foreign exchange hosts discover many rewards

BY AILEEN WINGBLAD
STAFF WRITER

Maybe you've seen the ads — "International Exchange student organizations searching for American host families."

Officials from these groups seem always ready to spread the word about their programs, hoping to spark interest among more area residents.

Unfortunately for the organizations as well as their participants, American families aren't always eager to host foreign exchange students.

And, program coordinators add, in many cases this reluctance is fueled by misconceptions, economic uncertainty and simply a general lack of interest among Americans when it comes to intercultural exchange.

"One of the main issues is just getting the word out," says Evelyn Prince, a West Bloomfield resident and state coordinator for Nacel Cultural Exchange.

Nacel, which is largely involved with summertime exchange programs, placed more than 300 foreign teenagers with Michigan families this summer, including several within Oakland County.

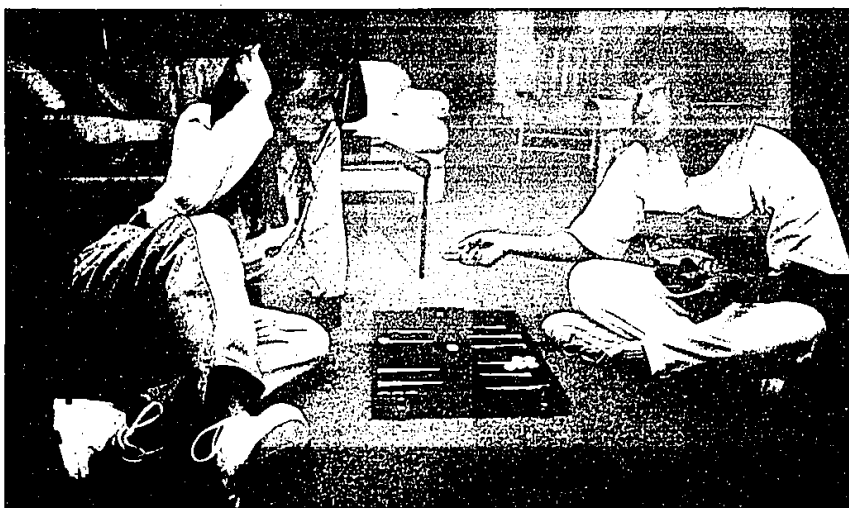
"When enough people hear about it, we usually get very warm offers and a wonderful response," says Prince. "Yet perhaps this year we've gotten fewer responses. It may be that people are holding back more but it's hard to know for sure."

Prince speculates that many potential host families might be hesitating to commit to the program these days because they aren't sure what will be expected of them once the student arrives.

Prince is quick to point out, however, that there is a terrific support system within Nacel's corps of representatives.

Prince also makes it clear that the intent of foreign student exchange is to bring a teen into the American family experience.

"The most important thing is to help the student feel he is part of the family," she said. "Treat him or



SHARON LE MEUX/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Foreign exchange student: Maria Alvarez Ruiz and host Mia Boger play backgammon at the Boger home in Farmington Hills. Exchange students enjoy the simple pleasures, officials say.

her like a brother or sister, a son or daughter. It's the warmth of that welcome that counts. If you treat them like a member of the family, it will be a great success."

Ordinary is best

Families that think they'll be expected to entertain the student with costly vacations, sightseeing trips and the like are worrying needlessly, too, Prince says.

In fact, she says, the "experience of the everyday" is what the students seek. "And having a foreign exchange student along makes everyday things more interesting. You

can take them to see a softball game, introduce them to peanut butter, hot fudge sundaes, microwave popcorn. You can plan a picnic and volleyball.

"There is plenty you can do without spending a lot of money. These kinds of moments can end up being the most memorable."

Language barriers aren't a problem either, she says. Most students have had several years of English language study.

"These kids have studied English and want to use it. They expect to use it," says Prince.

Masha Silver, a Farmington Hills resident and coordinator for the International Education Forum

(IEF), another foreign exchange program, likes to emphasize the benefits to a family which hosts a foreign student.

Those who open their homes and their way of life have a great deal to gain, says Silver.

"When it works the way it's supposed to — and in most cases it does — special relationships are established. It establishes grassroots and people-to-people relationships. It builds bridges between cultures and countries. And when it works, it's beautiful," Silver says.

Of course, she adds, "getting it to work" in the first place can be a dilemma. Silver agrees with Prince that people need to be reassured

that helping hands and trouble shooters like herself are ready to assist if a need arises.

Economic woes

But Silver also suspects that economic woes are keeping some people from becoming host families.

"Let's face it — economic times are tough. People are afraid to take on added responsibility. People really have to think twice. This year has been more difficult for us — and for all organizations — economically."

"I can't say the change (in numbers of host families) has been drastic, but it has certainly been getting

worse, especially over the past two years. I'm afraid we have more children seeking homes than homes," says Silver.

However, Silver says, people should be aware that exchange students are responsible for their own spending money and do carry medical insurance, while host families are able to deduct \$50 per month on their annual income tax returns for expenses incurred while the student is living with them.

Monetary issues aside, Silver says that hosting a student is an invaluable experience — one that is all too often ignored by many American families.

"We are a very isolated and insular country," she adds. Foreign exchange programs can bring more of the world into our homes, our schools and our country."

Prince agrees

"I'm not sure people in general realize how important it is for a child to be exposed to people from other countries," Prince says. "With the world getting smaller and with businesses focusing on the world market, it's no longer the case that if you are successful in America you can say you have made it. Exposing your children to people from other countries and to other cultures is the first step."

Prince's colleague, Martie Ports, a Farmington Hills resident and middle school teacher, strongly echoes this sentiment.

Says Ports: "The main problem is that we are not teaching our kids to think globally like kids from other parts of the world. Our kids are still so narrow-minded. They think our country is the only one on earth, our language is the only one that exists."

"European kids are speaking three or four languages; they know all about our government and all. Ask a U.S. kid where New Zealand is and many won't be able to tell you."

For more information on Nacel, contact Evelyn or Julian Prince at 626-6641, or Martie Ports at 476-0793. Masha Silver can be reached at 851-3432 for information on IEF.

Spanish student's sojourn is an enriching experience

BY CASEY HANS
STAFF WRITER

A summer visit to Farmington Hills has been an eye-opening experience for Maria Alvarez Ruiz.

The 16-year-old native of Tudela, Spain took her first airplane ride to get here, said she loves the American shopping malls and finds this country very different than her own.

She is visiting the Boger family of Farmington Hills through the NACEL Cultural Exchange program and members of her host family said her English has improved greatly since she arrived in July.

"Here, the people are nice, but different," Maria said. Everything about the United States has surprised her, she said, from the detached single family housing to what she considers spicy cooking.

"I wanted to come here because I like English — I wanted to meet different people," she said. One of her big thrills, she said, was buying American shoes.

In her one-month stay, Bill and Cheryl Boger and their family took Maria to Niagara Falls, Arizona, Chicago, Canada and through the South to Atlanta to visit other family members. The Bogers hosted an exchange student seven years ago when their 18- and 20-year-old sons were younger. "We were waiting for the right time for (daughter) Mia," said Cheryl Boger.

Cheryl said it was hard for Maria to adjust to a new country and language during her first few days here, but that she has adjusted well. "I like her acceptance," Cheryl said. "She's been so open to learning everything. She didn't contrast and use a lot of comparisons here."



Cheryl Boger



Maria Alvarez Ruiz

"She just says our ways are 'not wrong, just different.'"

During her stay, Maria has also learned about differences in religion. The Bogers are Protestant and Maria is Catholic. She has helped at their church's vacation bible school and attended services here.

Maria hopes to visit Harrison High School with Mia this week when classes begin, where she wants to meet Spanish teacher Charmaine Ragusa.

Mia is taking fourth year Spanish, so Maria's visit is especially interesting for her. Mia has taught Maria backgammon and the two have spent a lot of time together during Maria's visit.

Having an exchange student like Maria "takes us back to basics,"

said Cheryl. "We learn a lot more about people, both the similarities and differences."

In Spain, Maria spends a lot of time with her teenage friends, riding her motorbike — in Spain you cannot drive until you're 16 — and visiting dance clubs, parks and the beach. She and her seven-year-old sister both live with their mother, and she sees her father on weekends, she said.

She is pleased that the recent Summer Olympics were held in Barcelona, because now the whole world knows about her country, she said.

Maria leaves the United States in late August and begins her school year in Spain on Sept. 15.

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Firefighters take to the diamond

If you'd like to see firefighters plug it out on the baseball diamond for a good cause, you're invited to the 11th annual Softball Benefit hosted by the Farmington Hills firefighters from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 29, at Pioneer Park on Farmington Road.

Tournament proceeds will go to the National Institute for Burn

Medicine in Ann Arbor. Over the years, the benefit has allowed firefighters to donate more than \$12,000 to the institute, said Denny Hughes, tournament director.

"We won for the first time last year," he added.

Farmington Hills firefighters plan to defend their title Saturday when teams from Sterling Heights,

Clinton Township, Warren, Southfield and Metro Airport arrive for the tournament.

Proceeds come from team registration fees and donations from the fire chiefs association and firefighters union, as well as from local businesses. Umpires from Novi will donate their time for the game, Hughes said.

Refreshments will be available.