



Photo By Jeff Burns

Host families ease the loneliness for international students. Gayle and John Rankin eased the homesickness of Kazahiro Katoh, Chiyomi Wada and Tsuyoshi Washio pictured above.

Living a long way from home

By Joan Herman
Of the Emerald

Homesickness, sniff, sniff: the bane of most University students away from the "nest" for the first time.

To combat feelings of loneliness many students make regular sojourns back to Ma, Pa and the rest of the familial gang... unless their homes are several thousand miles and an ocean away, as is the case for most international students studying at the University.

Chiyomi Wada knows those feelings all too well. So do Kazahiro Katoh and Tsuyoshi Washio, to name just a few.

"I miss my friends and family very much. My parents miss me very much," Chiyomi said at a going away party in her honor. She has since returned to Japan.

The three Japanese students studied English at the University's American English Institute.

But that's not all they had in common. The trio also was "adopted" by a local family, the Rankins, who welcomed the students into their home, shared American customs and became their close friends.

"Our main function," John Rankin says, "is to provide them with a solid foundation where they can feel comfortable. They're home free here. And then they can go out and test waters elsewhere. But they need (to know about) certain things such as banking, traveling — whatever might arise."

Tasks such as finding a doctor seem simple to Americans, "but for these people, it becomes a maze, a chore. That's our big function: to provide them with a few answers when they come to us with problems," John says.

Each year several local families act as "host" families to international students studying at the AEI and the University. Gayle and John Rankin have "adopted" seven Japanese students into their home since 1981. And they hope to "expand" their family even more.

"I see no reason why to stop," Gayle says. "It's a good thing."

Although the Rankins enthusiastically endorse the host program now, Gayle admits she was initially reluctant. Two years ago, the last of the Rankins' four children had left the 'nest,' and Gayle welcomed the new freedom that meant.

"When the lady from AEI started asking me to do this, I thought 'Oh, what would I want another kid around for? I have four of my own.' I said 'no' for a year and finally one day she just came over and said 'I'm going to try one more time.'"

"I thought 'You're kidding.' And she just said try it for one month and I said 'OK.' That was it." The Rankins were hooked.

And so were their "adopted" children. All three students emphasized that the American family's hospitality made a potentially difficult transition from Japanese to American culture a relatively smooth one.

"When I came here, I was not afraid because the American people are very kind and (the Rankins) made things comfortable for me," Kazahiro says.

"We'll leave, if you want, so you can tell the truth," jokes John with Kazahiro.

Yet a strange culture and language inevitably present some challenging situations — especially because the Rankins don't speak Japanese.

"We did a lot of groping," John says about their first conversations with the students. "That's just part of the process."

Although all three students had studied English extensively in Japan, none had ever spoken it with Americans before coming to the United States. Yet now all three converse freely with their new family. Dinner conversations often last more than one hour, John says, and enable the students to ask many questions about American customs.

Yet the benefits are not one-sided. The "cross-fertilization" of cultures, as John calls it, sows strong bonds between all parties.

"It's like a trip to Japan for the family," Gayle says. "It's new friends and not just new friends, but close friends, the kind that takes years to develop when you don't live in the same house together."

Inevitably, the time comes when the students must return to Japan. No one looks forward to that day.

"It really is sad for us when they leave. We become very attached. I see John out buying cars and getting insurance for them just like he would for his own boys," and in a sense, the students do become "family" to them, both John and Gayle say.

Yet they will keep in touch with letters, and eventually the Rankins will visit their friends on their home turf. Until then, they will continue "adopting" more international students.

"I would like to encourage anyone who's been thinking about doing this to do it. It's a little like anything you've never done before. You're a little apprehensive about it."

Interested families can call the AEI at 686-3945.



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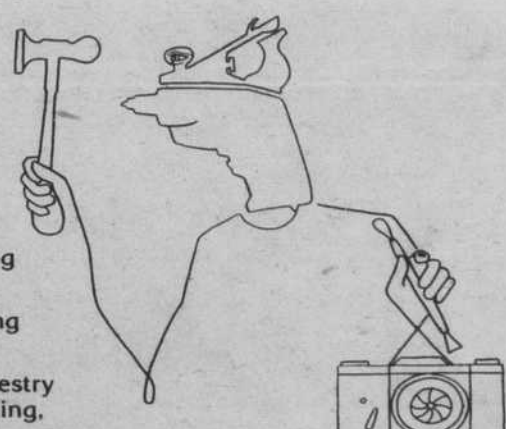
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