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# Friendship through conversation

■ Three related programs help international students adjust to campus life and American culture at the University

By Robin Weber  
Oregon Daily Emerald

University students can make a friend a world away with the Friendship Foundation for International Students.

The private nonprofit organization, which joined the University in 1950, now links international students, spouses and scholars to community members through three programs — The International Friend Program, the Pre-orientation Homestay Program and the Conversation Friend Program. The 484 volunteers in the Eugene-Springfield area donate funds and help the program thrive, FFIS coordinator Hilary Lord said.

"The idea is to form a lasting friendship and continue it throughout school," Lord said. "And it happens."

Although FFIS has been in the campus community for more than half a century, its leaders are constantly seeking more able bodies to help the almost 1,400 international students in all areas of the program.

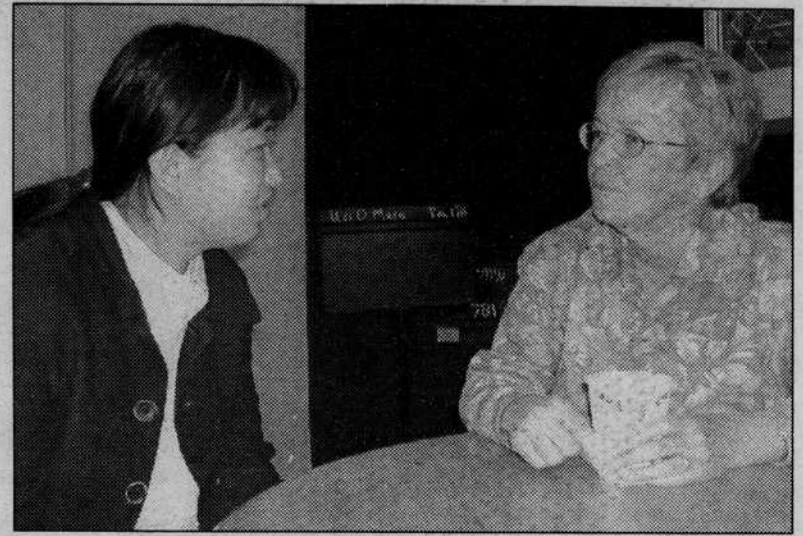
To lend a hand, all volunteers need to do is apply. From there, the application is reviewed, interviews are conducted and a student-friend match is made.

Often, once volunteers step into FFIS, they're hooked.

Conversation Friend Program Coordinator Peggy Rice said in her experience, the program is mutually beneficial for students and friends. The program opens a door for the students to spend about an hour or more a week chatting in conversational English with a volunteer.

"It's helpful to them as far as English, and enriches our lives because we get to learn about their cultures," Rice said.

Students in the program agree. "I can improve my English and learn about America," student



Robin Weber Emerald

Tingfang Wang practices English with Conversation Friend Program coordinator Peggy Rice of the Friendship Foundation for International Students.

Tingfang Wang said.

Rice developed the program in 1995 after success working with a similar travel program for international students. She said she saw the necessity for students to learn English from other means besides textbooks when one of the scholars she was talking to needed a translator.

Rice wanted students to be able to apply the language skills they were learning to everyday life. She also wanted to repay the favor to people of countries where she was the guest.

"People in those countries are so helpful and a wonderful example for us — we, too, need to be kind and understanding to them," she said.

The Pre-orientation Homestay Program in September matches incoming international students with hosts to act as a welcoming committee for a few days before fall term starts. Hosts make the transition easier for international students with activities like shopping, setting up a bank account and learning to navigate Lane County.

When Bulgarian graduate student Lidia Karmadjieva came to Oregon, she got into the Pre-orientation Homestay Program to douse

her fears of not finding a new social circle.

"You hear horror stories about when you come in and have nowhere to stay," she said.

But after being paired with hosts in Eugene, Karmadjieva said she made lasting relationships with her newfound friends while learning about American culture.

Like the Pre-orientation Homestay Program, The International Friend Program sets up students and Eugene locals, but with the aim of meeting throughout the year for informal get-togethers and day trips. Hosts are encouraged to bring American holiday customs to the newcomers.

The FFIS program also has activities for students to interact with the entire University.

International students are welcomed to the University with a fall picnic, a mixer for families and international friends. Throughout the year, they can also take part in the Eugene Celebration Parade and the President's Reception, a welcome to the state and the country by University President Dave Frohnmayer and community leaders.

E-mail reporter Robin Weber  
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