Evanston families open their doors to Northwestern University international students celebrating their first Thanksgiving

By Genevieve Bookwalter
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Northwestern international students Igor Eufrasio of Brazil, left, Markus Holzinger of Germany, Evanston host Elaine Eisen Heuberger, student Aditya Sinha of India and host Richie Heuberger shared Thanksgiving dinner together on Nov. 28, 2019 in Evanston. (Courtesy of Igor Eufrasio)
Some Northwestern University international students said they couldn’t wait to experience Thanksgiving, that most American of holidays, and see for themselves if it lived up to the movies and TV shows they see at home.

Others said they longed for a sense of family, even for one day, as it’s been a long time since they saw their own relatives across the globe.

As such, more than 100 local families hosted more than 300 Northwestern University students and researchers representing 45 countries for Thanksgiving celebrations this year. Most of those gatherings were in Evanston, with a few in Chicago and surrounding suburbs, said Stephanie Cisneros, international student advisor at Northwestern.

Now in its 11th year, the program continues to grow in popularity each year with both students and the families who host them, Cisneros said. She has coordinated the program for the last seven Thanksgiving holidays.

“I am proud to share that this program has grown in popularity among alumni, members of the Northwestern community, and local community members,” Cisneros said in an email. “When I first started coordinating the program, our average number of host families who signed up was around 20-25 families, and now for the last three years, our average has been well over 100 host families.”

Igor Eufrasio, 26, of Brazil, is earning his Ph.D. in Northwestern’s Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences. He said he signed up for the program because “I haven’t been able to see my family in a long time.”

“I hope it feels like family,” said Eufrasio, the day before Thanksgiving.

He added that the holiday is a big part of American culture. “I’m excited to go there and see it with my own eyes.”

Evanston resident Elaine Eisen Heuberger said Eufrasio was one of 30 people at her home for dinner, and called this year’s celebration “one of the best Thanksgivings ever.” Three of her guests were Northwestern international students. She also had other friends and family representing countries around the world, she said.

While many of the guests did not know each other when they arrived, the conversation quickly started flowing and most “stayed for a long time, which I always think is the signal of a great evening,” Heuberger said.

Markus Holzinger, 32, of Germany, also spent Thanksgiving with Heuberger and called the experience amazing.

“The turkey, my grandma used to make it on Christmas, so it reminded me of that,” Holzinger said. Also, he marveled, “it’s really tough to get 20 people to eat together in a non-chaotic way,” which Heuberger successfully pulled off.
Sanaz Zahedi, 26, of Iran, called Thanksgiving “one of the best events in the states.”

“I felt like I was spending time with my own family,” Zahedi said. She even made plans with her host family to visit her when she returns to Iran. She is studying law at Northwestern.

“I will be happy to repay their kindness back home,” she said.

Zachary Zises, whose family hosted Zahedi, said the match couldn’t have been better.

“I have a crush on the country of Iran and have since my 20s,” Zises said. He enjoyed hearing more about what Iran looks like on the ground.

Zises said hosting the international students “adds a weight and a gravity to the event,” as you want to “represent your country well.”

On Friday, Eufrasio said the Thanksgiving holiday ended up surpassing his own expectations. One of the most meaningful moments, he said, was when he looked out the window of his host family’s home and saw other families in other homes, also gathering to share Thanksgiving dinner.

“We were eating and I saw so many families eating too,” Eufrasio said. “It was wonderful.”

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Contact

Genevieve Bookwalter covers the people and happenings in and around Evanston. She joined the Tribune in 2014 after working as a reporter and editor for news outlets in Northern California. In her spare time you usually can find her hiking a trail somewhere.