

International Students Bring Multicultural Flavor to Wauwatosa

By Jenny Wisniewski



It's back-to-school time. For some, preparations involve a bit more than purchasing multiple spiral notebooks and paying for the gym uniform. This fall, approximately 160 Wauwatosa high school students

packed up as many belongings as could fit in their suitcases, hugged Mom and Dad goodbye, and flew in from countries as far-flung as China and Uganda.

On Bluemound Road just east of Glenview Avenue, two new buildings have been erected. A 62-unit apartment building sits closest to Bluemound. Behind it sits Honey Creek Hall, now home to Wisconsin Lutheran High School's 2019-2020 international students. The students hail from Albania, Japan, Malta, Montenegro, Nigeria, Serbia, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam and South Korea, in addition to China and Uganda.

For the first time this fall, they will live in apartment-style dormitories, a far cry from the six well-worn apartments and townhouses that previously existed on the same parcel of land owned by Wisconsin Lutheran High School (WLHS). The Honey Creek Place apartments are operated and managed by a firm independent of WLHS although as one of the investors, WLHS will receive a portion of the income from the apartments.

The much-improved housing has led, at least in part, to a steady increase in the number of students in the program. During the 2018-19 school year, enrollment was 46 students. The previous year the number was 31. Enrollment as of July 2019 for the upcoming school year was 67, now 7 percent of WLHS's student population. WLHS aims to reach 10 percent international student enrollment, said Dr. Kenneth Fisher, WLHS president.

Farther down Bluemound Road to the west sits Wisconsin International Academy (WIA). Formerly a Days Inn, the

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building will house approximately 90 students for the 2019-2020 school year. Unlike WLHS's multicultural blend, WIA students are all residents of China.

WIA's school model is unique, too. Students live, eat and receive a multitude of services through WIA. However, they are transported daily by bus or van to six local high schools: Pius XI, Dominican, Catholic Memorial, St. Thomas More and Martin Luther High Schools and University Lake School.

DIFFERENT VISAS, DIFFERENT PROGRAMS

Long-term international programs have become far more popular than their cousins, the one-year exchange programs. In 2016 only 28% of the foreign high school students studying in the U.S. enrolled in shorter, usually one-year exchange programs, according to a 2017 report from the Institute of International Education (IIE). These students were required to obtain a J-1 visa, allowing them to study for one year in a U.S. high school. The other 72 percent obtained F-1 visas, enabling them to study for longer periods with the intention of earning a high school diploma in the U.S.

Many of the students in the long-term U.S. programs spend the entirety of their high school journeys studying in the states. The U.S. has become the top host of international students in the world with students attending schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. (International students still make up only half a percent of the more than 15.5 million secondary students in the U.S., according to the IIE.)

An economic boost results from the approximately 60,000 high school students who immerse themselves in local communities across the country. WIA currently employs 56 individuals. Parents who visit use restaurants, hotels, even rent houses. And those who use Bluemound as a thoroughfare have probably noticed groups of students walking to local shops and eateries.



Bekki Willems-Solc, an English Language Learner instructor, practices English with WIA student Chris Zhang at Dominican High School. WIA provides an ELL teacher at each of their six partner schools.

WIA student Jack Li conducts a chemistry experiment with classmates at Pius XI High School.



A LONG WAY FROM HOME

Why would a 15-year-old student from Beijing choose to spend four years of her adolescence in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin? One overarching reason exists - students strive to earn a diploma and increase their chances for admission to a U.S. college - and not just any college. These students seek admission to elite U.S. colleges.

Conditions are ripe in countries such as China and Brazil for the possibility of sending young students abroad to study. As their economies develop and the middle class grows, the possibility becomes available for more families. In addition, a quality education is not available for all in the students' home countries.

In China, being accepted to a good high school is highly competitive and dependent on a single middle school test score. In order to get on the track to attend a good university, students fight for spots in the high schools. And as WIA President Jian Sun pointed out, many families in Asia, for whom education is very important, have only one child. Parents can concentrate their resources on the single child's education. "They want their kids to be globally competitive and out of a test-driven system," Sun said.

Chan Chu, from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, is entering her senior year at WLHS. Exposure to a more globalized education system and living environment fueled her desire to become an international student. "I can say that the U.S. is

the most ideal place for that because of its diversity in ethnicities and nationalities," Chu said. "Coming from a mostly homogeneous country, I definitely have learned a lot from many of my friends from different races and countries."

Attending a high school in the U.S. not only provides a solid academic foundation and cultural acclimation, it allows the students to learn about the university system in the states. The international programs teach them how to prepare for college applications. In addition, the opportunity enables them to improve their English skills.

While international high school programs on the coasts are better known, WIA stresses the value of living in the heartland. It is less congested in a locale such as Wauwatosa, and students will get more individualized attention, said Dr. Matt Gibson, WIA principal and former superintendent of the Elmbrook School District. "The parents like the nurturing and the clean air but also that they can still get into top schools," he said.

At WIA the nurturing begins at the get-go. Their "Total Care" program helps students obtain visas and make travel arrangements. The program also provides English Language Learner (ELL) teachers to all of the partner schools, organizes WIA clubs, and delivers thorough orientations to help students bridge the cultural gap.

A caterer brings in Chinese dinner every

night. In addition, students begin creating portfolios for themselves when they arrive and are guided by college counselors beginning their first year in the U.S. The WIA also sends monthly individualized reports to parents.

U.S. high school culture differs from that in some other countries. International students need to shift from "a teacher-driven learning style to a more inquiry-based, student-led learning style," Fisher explained. In addition, Asian high schools don't offer sports activities or co-curriculars. At WLHS a religious component exists that might be new to students, too. WLHS offers an "Introduction to Christianity" course for those students with no religious background.

The differences were stark but welcoming for Chu. "When I first came here, I so admired those who can balance between homework, extracurricular activities and even having a job because, in my country, the teenagers' world tends to be around school, home and homework (sometimes music classes)," Chu said. "I mean, many don't know what their real interests are, which is sad."

The 2017 report from the IIE found that the number of international secondary students in the U.S. more than tripled between 2004 and 2016.

HOSTS ENTHUSIASTICALLY RECRUIT

It is clear what the motivation is for international students to come to the U.S. to study. What is the motivation for the schools?

Prior to 2012, WLHS hosted just a handful of students in its program. Fisher and others realized the global perspective



Henry Creek Hall creates community with suites that include several two-person bedrooms, two bathrooms and a kitchenette. Students also have access to the community kitchen on the main floor. The hall is also to accommodate up to 72 students.



The new Henry Creek Hall, an apartment-style dormitory, was built following the establishment of Henry Creek LLC. Investors included WLHS supporters, the WLHS Foundation, and WLHS.

the students brought to the WLHS community and decided to expand the program as a means of expanding their mission “to prepare young adults for productive, Christ-centered lives in a diverse world.”

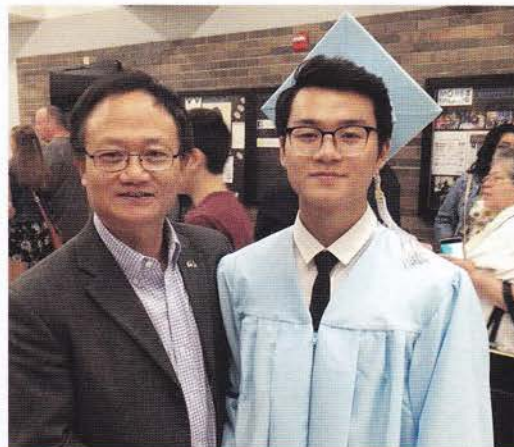
“The students gain cultural competencies and international friendships,” Fisher said. “The program enriches the classroom, creates interesting dialogues and prepares students to live in a global society.” Not only does WLHS host students from other countries, it sends its American students out on trips to complete missions and gain new perspectives, too. During the 2018-19 school year, 128 students traveled out of the country on 17 different trips.

Sun’s motivation was based on his own lived experiences. After growing up in Anhui Province in South-east China and studying at Peking University, Sun arrived in Milwaukee in 1992 to begin a Marquette University graduate program. After receiving master’s degrees in chemistry and math, statistics and computer science, he stayed in the Milwaukee area, working for 16 years as the general manager for an internet services business.

Kim credits Marquette University for instilling in him the importance of community engagement. This

lesson that he took from MU, combined with his desire to promote Chinese culture and heritage, led to his participation in founding the Milwaukee Chinese Community Center. Currently, he serves as the president.

With these precursors, it is not a stretch to understand Sun’s enthusiasm for WIA. In 2012, Sun began looking for living space for Chinese students wanting to study in the Milwaukee area. After renting in Glendale for two years, WIA moved to its current home in Wauwatosa in 2014.



WIA President Jian Sun celebrates with graduate Lance Ouyang following the 2018 St. Thomas More High School commencement.

NATIONAL TRENDS SHOW SLOW DOWN

The 2017 report from the IIE found that the number of international secondary students in the U.S. more than tripled between 2004 and 2016. However, in recent years that growth has slowed. This is true not only in secondary education but also undergraduate and graduate programs.

According to Jill Welch, the deputy director of public policy for NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the reasons for the decline include challenges obtaining visas and anti-immigration rhetoric. Testifying at the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Border Security and Immigration, she said: “To make America more secure and welcoming to international students and scholars, Congress should avoid unwelcoming rhetoric and policies.”

WIA’s enrollment closely reflects these national patterns. As of July, enrollment was 90, down from 152 two years ago. Gibson cited an increase in the popularity of international schools in China as another contributing factor to the recent dip in Chinese students studying in the U.S. However, the staff is encouraged by the 27 new students enrolled for the 2019-20 school year, Gibson said.

WLHS has been able to avert the recent slump. In addition to the new dorm, Fisher credits focused recruitment efforts and the addition of a few new programs that appeal to international students.

Within the WLHS atrium hang a row of flags, one for each of the international student’s home countries. Their pursuit of knowledge has brought them many miles from home. Because of the vision of Fisher, as well as Sun and Gibson, students from far away lands will continue that journey carrying a Midwestern version of American education. In exchange, Wauwatosa students are given a window to the world, one visitor at a time. (E)