



Suburban families bring European culture home

By Matt Arado | Daily Herald Staff

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Most people would love to experience a new culture. Few, though, can spend the money necessary to jet off to Europe or the Middle East, especially during a recession.

A couple of suburban families have found a solution. Why not invite someone from a different culture to live here?

The Fuentes family in Itasca and the Valene family in Carol Stream have done that. Both families are hosting students from overseas for the duration of the current school year. They were matched with the students by the Chicago-based Center for Cultural Interchange, which places roughly 1,000 foreign exchange students into American homes each year.

The visiting students live like any other member of the host families; they do chores around the house, go to the local high schools and hang out at the mall with friends.

"It's been so rewarding for us," said Marla Fuentes. "We learn from the student, and I can see that she is learning about America from us."

Tiffany Daxauer, a 17-year-old from Germany, is staying in the Fuentes home. She said she's had a blast going to Lake Park High School and making friends in America. She said being here for the election and inauguration of President Obama was particularly cool.

"I thought the first month would be so hard," Daxauer said. "I worried about my English being good enough, and going to a new school. But everyone has been so great. They've really tried to make sure I'm happy here."

Fuentes, meanwhile, has enjoyed her time with Daxauer so much that she plans to sign up as a host again.

"Tiffany has been wonderful," she said. "Talking to someone new to this country really puts things in perspective for me. It will be sad when she leaves in June. I know I'll feel a void. But that will make it even more fun to do this a second time."

Sue Valene can relate. She's hosting a student for the second time herself.

"I went to Egypt when I was 10 years old and lived with a family there," Valene said. "I'm glad I get to return that favor to someone else."

Irene Paolin, a 17-year-old from Italy, is staying with the Valenes. She says she's naturally shy, so it took her some time to feel comfortable in her new surroundings. But now she feels right at home.

"What has struck me the most is how open-minded and friendly the people are here," she said.

Paolin goes to Glenbard North with Valene's 15-year-old son. The two get along well, and Irene has gotten involved in the school's drama club, Valene said.

CCI is always looking for new host parents/families. Hosts are required to provide a roof over the student's head, meals with the family and transportation. The student brings his or her own spending money.

Both Fuentes and Valene said they would recommend the experience without hesitation.

"Doing this has changed my thinking, and I think it's had a similar effect on the students," Valene said. "And it's fun just to expand our family a little bit."

People interested in hosting students for the 2009-10 school year have until Aug. 28 to apply. For information, visit cci-exchange.com, send an e-mail to ayp@cci-exchange.com or call (800) 634-4771.