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Kyrgyzstan teen received warm welcome in Hobe Sound

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Posted: 2009 May 08 - 00:45



Exchange student says he's living his dream

By Samantha Joseph

Staff writer

MARTIN COUNTY - A teenager from the central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan says he is living his dream of experiencing life in the U.S.

Outgoing 17-year-old Izat Osmonov says he'll never forget his time in Hobe Sound, where in the last 10 months, he has been a popular high school honors student, soccer player, international traveler, taster of exotic foods and a beach baby.

"Back home, everybody is dreaming about the ocean. This was my first winter without snow outside. It's been a great experience, living in the United States, and especially in Florida," he said. "It's going to be a culture shock when I go back. Ten months have changed me."

His second day in the country found him diving into the ocean at Hobe Sound Beach. It was one of many firsts for the boy who has since participated in the presidential campaign of Barack Obama and spoken at conferences on diversity, while making friends, attending parties and getting top grades in school.

It was a big departure from his life at home, where he attends an all-boys high school in a Muslim country west of China that was once part of the Soviet Union.

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"This year has been great. I found what I needed for myself," said Izat. "People have been so friendly, and I feel so welcome."

His stay in the U.S. is part of a student exchange program that the Chicago-based Center for Cultural Exchange administers through a State Department initiative to promote democratic values and cultural understanding.

"An experience like this helps alleviate some of the misconceptions about cultural differences that exist in the world today," said Staci Dolgin-Rubinstein, a spokeswoman for the group, which works with about 1,000 students from 40 countries each year.

"It is especially relevant in the current political climate."

Izat, who speaks four languages, including English, Russian and Turkish, is Muslim. His host parents in Hobe Sound, Karen and Warren Master, are Jewish.

"We have our extended international family," said Mr. Master, who has long embraced cultural exchange. He, too, speaks several languages, including Turkish, which was strengthened when he and his wife spent part of the 1960s as Peace Corps volunteers in Turkey.

The couple has a long history of student sponsorship, and has developed lifelong relationships with their former guests, who've hailed from Iran, Peru, Vietnam and several other countries, and who have lived with them for up to 11 years.

Ms. Master is a retired high school teacher, and her husband is editor in chief of "The Public Manager," a trade journal for public sector leaders. Izat now blogs at www.thepublicmanager.org about his experience in the U.S.

"We've had a number of those sorts of scenarios during our lifetimes," Mr. Master said.

But last year, a news report about declining interest in hosting foreign students caught his attention. A global economic recession and international conflicts were taking a toll on student-exchange programs. The Masters, who are in their mid- to late-60s and whose three adult children all have families of their own, decided to be host parents to a teenager.

"The last thing I was thinking about was having an exchange student for a year, but we'd done it so many times, I said, 'Yeah, why not?'" Ms. Master said. "And it's been fantastic. It really has been terrific."

She has found it easy to welcome the boy, whom she describes as smart and friendly.

"I love him because he has a lot of maturity, but he also has a lot of kid in him," she said. "Every place he goes, people know him. He keeps meeting people."

Izat has become a popular student at South Fork High School, where, encouraged by Mr. Master, he tried out for and joined the soccer team. The boy also got his first taste of life as an American teen, eating fast food and getting rides to school with friends.

"Everything was a first for me. McDonald's and even little things, like Dunkin' Donuts. Teenagers having their own cars; that was my first experience with that," he said. "I was very impressed and glad that I came to Florida, especially to this house and this family. I've found people who seriously care about me and want me to be successful."

Before his visit ends on May 28, the Masters plan to take Izat to visit New York City and Washington, D.C.

"I am not looking forward to saying goodbye to him. It's been terrific. I will cry at the airport, and I think it will be hard for him, too," Ms. Master said.

Izat expects a sad departure that will see him leave behind people who he now regards as close friends and family.

"This is a part of my heart now," he said.

For more information on hosting a child or teen contact the Center for Cultural Exchange at (847) 549-0712.

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