

Host family crucial in international student program

Victor dos Santos's arrival in Dartmouth this past January was a surprisingly chilly affair.

"In Brazil," joked the 19-year-old Auburn Drive High School student in a recent interview, "it was like 30 degrees when I left. I was wearing a shirt, only a T-shirt, and it was really hot. But when I got here, it was -20 and snowing. I had no coat on . . . it was really shocking."

Like so many international students who come to Nova Scotia every year to live and learn, one of the first things Victor had to get used to was the weather. Because he had come to learn and experience as much as he possibly could in just five short months, he also had to quickly adjust to a myriad of other things as well: a new school, new friends, unfamiliar food and a different family.

Dan Walsh, program manager for international services for the Halifax regional school board, recently made it clear that it's the family that is key to the success of any international student experience. "The size of our program, the success of our program, is totally

TWO CENT'S WORTH



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dependent on the number and quality of host families that we have," said Walsh.

"Everything else is secondary. If the students have a negative experience in their host home, then it doesn't matter how good the school is, or how good their friends are. The host family is the crucial component in the process."

In the course of researching this issue for personal reasons, I was surprised to learn that, at any given time, there can be anywhere from 60 to 70 international students living in the Dartmouth/Cole Harbour area and attending local junior and senior high schools.

The students, Walsh said, come "from every corner of the world."

They come to learn English, immerse themselves in our unique Maritime culture and gain independence. In the course of doing these things, however, they also tend to give much back in return.

As Walsh puts it, these special visitors "bring the world to our students." They also share their lives with and become very dear and close to their host families. "One of the worst times in the program," said Walsh, "is when you go to the airport at the end of it all and have to say good bye."

By the time this column is published, Victor will be back home in Brazil (let's hope he checked the weather forecast there before leaving!). Having had the opportunity to speak with him before he left, however, I certainly know that his departure will have been bittersweet.

As he sat with me before leaving, wearing his wrinkly and obviously well-worn green "I ♥ Nova Scotia" T-shirt, he did spend a little time telling me about the things he experienced during his stay.

(And, just to digress for one moment,

I have to add that, as he spoke of all the museums he had visited, of sledding in the snow, of hiking on frozen lakes and of seeing the most beautiful sunset he's ever seen while out fishing one evening, I came to realize that I've begun to take this community for granted — to overlook what makes it so wonderful.)

Mostly, however, Victor spoke of his host family. "I think, first of all, it's kind of hard to leave your own family behind," he said, "But it's easier when the family that you come to is open to love you; when they are friendly and patient and willing to hear about your life and your country. It was really a nice, wonderful experience."

If you love kids, have an open and generous spirit, would like to learn about another culture and would relish the opportunity to view this community through new, curious eyes, you just may find this program interesting. Go to www.nslsp.ca for more information.

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