

East meets West in Cardinal O'Hara exchange program

Tonawanda family welcomes Chinese exchange student

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Hebrews 13:1-2 states "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, thereby some have entertained angels unawares." That has been the experience of the Oates family of Tonawanda, who opened their doors to Fangyu Liu, a student with Cardinal O'Hara High Schools international students' program.

Despite already having a house practically overflowing with seven children, Rick and Rhoda Oates welcomed the 16-year-old boy from China as a favor to a friend. "Our door was knocked on," explained Rick Oates, a self-employed business consultant and talent recruiter. They keep that door open to everyone, allowing a steady stream of friends and neighbors coming in and out.

Being self-employed allows Rick and Rhoda to be present to their children who range in age from 19 to 3. They also stay engaged in their community. Rick coaches and serves as a volunteer fireman and chaplain. They even go caroling on Christmas.

"We count on the Lord to help balance things, and He's always provided," Rick said.

When a friend in China asked them to host Fangyu for four years, the family thought about it and prayed.

"When we shared it with the kids, they were very excited to have Fangyu," Rhoda said. "We think we had a very positive response from them, which made me feel an affirmation that, yes, this was supposed to happen."

They got creative with their house, already bursting at the seams. Their two young boys let Fangyu have their room downstairs while one boy moved upstairs with the girls and the other is with the parents until a long-wanted attic bedroom is complete.

"Everybody had a really excited attitude to have another person come and join us. I'm excited for a lot of reasons," said Rhoda. "Hopefully, we'll make a difference in Fangyu's life in a positive way. He's going to make a difference in our lives. We're learning about China now and will continue. Seeing that diversity is an awesome thing," she then adds, "It's been fun waking up in the morning and smelling noodles for breakfast."

Fangyu attends Cardinal O'Hara, while to most of the Oates children attend public school. Annabeth is at NCCC, while Louis, 3, is a stay-at-home kid. Chinese students who wish to attend American colleges often come to the States for high school to learn the English language and familiarize themselves with American customs and way of life. O'Hara has a strong international programs with several



COURTESY OF THE OATES FAMILY

The Oates family, including Chinese student Fangyu Liu, enjoy a visit to the Sanborn Sunflower Field. Joining Liu are Rhoda (left to right), Annabeth, Charlotte, Andrew, Jenna and Rebecca, with Louis, Rick and Christa (in back).

connections in China.

Doug Buczak, director of enrollment and admissions for O'Hara, has been an asset to the Oates family during the planning process.

"He brought a lot of comfort to the table. He was a good resource," Rick said. "He's had experience. He gave us some good tips, which were very helpful and made us feel good."

One tip was to treat Fangyu just like someone in the family. Don't let him choose how he participates. So, Fangyu is learning to do his share of chores, and joins the family on special outings. These outings have had a mutual benefit for everyone.

Along with Chinese markets, the family visited the Sanborn Sunflower Field because Fangyu's father owns a flower farm. It became an opportunity to see one of the beautiful attractions of Western New York that locals never get around to seeing.

Tall and shy, Fangyu simply says he came to the U.S. to "study." He has also learned from his host family and shared about his own country.

After seeing flags flown at half staff during his first high school football game, Rick explained the tragic events of 9/11 to Fangyu, who in turn explained some tragedies that happened in China that never made it

to American newspapers.

"Everyone has their form of Sept. 11," Rick learned.

Another shared experience. Fangyu's father said children in China are too dependent on cell phones. Rick said they use as much as American kids.

"There are way more commonalities than there differences."

The family is committed to hosting Fangyu for his full four years at O'Hara. The Oates' have quickly become aware of the angel he is. The second day Andrew got a sliver in his foot. As Rhoda tended to the 6-year-old, Fangyu came by and pulled it out himself.

"I didn't ask him," said Rhoda.

"He just saw the need, came over," added Rick. "So, he's very thoughtful and sensitive to how he can help. He's pro-active with that. We've noticed that."

Pondering the positive affect Fangyu has had on the family so far. The Oates' are looking forward to the next four years.

"If God's in it, that's really what it comes down to. His ways are above ours. We've been around long enough to see that. The people He has put in our lives to help us along, even to get the addition on the house," Rick said. "We see His hand in so many things."