Group promotes cross-cultural understanding

By Chan-Fen Yen
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International students looking for opportunities to meet Americans and develop friendships through social activities can do so through an organization called International Friendship at Ohio State University.

"This organization is a bridge to offer chances for both American and non-American to increase mutual understanding and acceptance," said Tuck Weng Leong, a junior from Malaysia and president of the group.

Leong said the group has held programs to help foreign students understand American society and life-style while helping Americans understand the background and the thinking of international students.

"By joining the activities organized by this group, I got more opportunities to meet people from different places and to have a better understanding about American culture," said Song Wei Lam, a junior from Singapore. He heard about the program from his housemates who had been taking part in the group's programs.

"I don't feel so lonely or boring after participating in the activities held by this organization because I feel a sense of belonging to this society," Lam said.

Leong said he came to know how American people live together as a family and the American ways of living after being invited by native families for meals.

Leong said activities held by the organization include trips to Colorado, Washington, D.C., and Minnesota. Canoeing, horseback riding and sightseeing trips are planned for the future.

"More frequently, we also have picnics, parties and meals to promote acceptance of people from different backgrounds as they are and to encourage interaction between all cultures of the world," Leong said.

Leong said the activities of the group are organized with the help of about 15 community volunteers, most of whom are Americans.

"We are fortunate to have such a group of volunteers who are willing to share time, effort and lives with international students who join in our programs," Leong said.

"I enjoy getting along with people from other countries. For me that is an unforgettable personal experience," said Esther Hood, a physical therapist in Columbus. She has been a volunteer in the group since 1983.

She said Americans might have some kind of prejudice and bias toward foreigners, but through gradual interaction with them misunderstanding can disappear and friendship can be built.

"I appreciate the efforts international students make to us as far as the dedication and hospitality are concerned," Hood said.

Americans should make more friends with people from abroad because American people are the hosts to these guests from nations far away from the United States, she said.

Leong said the idea of forming an international organization emerged when Phil Saksa, a local missionary, became interested in establishing closer relationships with foreign students.

As a result, a group of community members volunteered to meet regularly and plan social events for international students at Ohio State, he said.

Later International Friendship was officially registered as an OSU student organization with international students as officials.

Leong emphasized the organization is not a religious one, but "we provide information about Christianity for anyone who is interested," he said.

Leong said everybody who has participated in the programs can be considered a member.

"We don't require membership fees but members should be prepared to bear the personal costs of the activities or events he joins in," Leong said.