

MLI Homestay looking for hosts to house overseas students



By Mike Pickford

A Toronto-based organization is presenting overseas students with a unique opportunity to experience life in small-town Canada through both long- and short-term high school placement programs.

MLI Homestay Toronto, a division of Muskoka Language International, has been organizing individual placements and group trips for international students for more than 20 years. Since the company's launch in 1995, thousands of students from countries such as China, Japan, Germany and Spain have been afforded the opportunity to experience a new way of life in the Great White North.

MLI Homestay has been situating students here in Orangeville for the past five years, having formed a working relationship with the Upper Grand District School Board and, more specifically, Orangeville District Secondary School. Earlier this month, a group of 18 students and three teachers from China spent seven days in the community learning about everything Orangeville has to offer.

Given the name 'Diamond Group', the class was in town from April 30 to May 6, spending a full week enrolled in classes at ODSS and living with host families throughout the community. Following the success of that trip, another troop - the 'Fantasy Tour Group' which includes 15 students and one adult chaperone - will land in Canada on July 23 and spend 12 days in the Orangeville area.

Currently, the organization is looking for potential families to host members of the group.

Local MLI Coordinator Jennifer Gauthier said the visits provide overseas visitors with an 'incredible opportunity' to see what life is like in a laid back, 'rurban' community like Orangeville.

'For a lot of these students, and of course teachers, to go from such a busy environment in China to a community like Orangeville is a big shock, but quite often a positive one,' Ms. Gauthier said. 'Our programs provide a unique way to share Canadian and Chinese culture, while also showcasing the Orangeville area to an entirely new group of people.'

While host families are compensated for opening their homes to visiting students, Ms. Gauthier says there's much more to be gained from a cultural and educational standpoint by signing up.

'I had two Chinese students living with my family and me at my home for a week during the last group visit and it was an incredible experience for us, but especially for my son. He got to see the world in a different light and had the opportunity to think about things with a larger view,' Ms. Gauthier said. 'The compensation helps - for this upcoming trip it's \$480 per student - but we don't want that to be the only reason people are interested.'

And while the focus for now remains on the upcoming temporary visit, Ms. Gauthier says there's also a need for more permanent homes for those currently involved in lengthy overseas exchange programs.

'Right now we have 10 students from countries around the world - Spain, Japan, China and Germany. We're offering a true rural experience here in Orangeville,' Ms. Gauthier said. 'With the current school year coming to a close, plans are already underway for next year. I have seven students booked and ready to arrive in September. I've found families for six, and three of those have been approved, but we're always on the lookout for good families.'

She added, 'It can be a real bonding experience - they just enjoy being in a Canadian family and experiencing how we live. The students leave with a better understand of Canadians, and we with a better understanding of their culture. It is a great way to share Canadian culture, open our hearts and share our generosity.'

For more information on MLI Homestay and their host family program, contact Jennifer Gauthier at orangeville@mlihomestay, or by phone at 519-217-0830.