**OSU WELCOMES INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WITH OPEN ARMS**

By: Teresa Rogge

After a long and tiring day working around an army of 5-year-olds, most teachers and staff enjoy a relaxing night at home. Rachel Stallings, the Director of the Rise School in Stillwater, spends her free time away from the kids in a unique way.

 Every Thursday night, Rachel switches her focus from runny noses and paint-covered hands to a completely different culture. She is greeted at home by a ‘hello’ from her husband, along with a ‘ni hao’ from about 10 others.

 For the past five years, Rachel and her husband Monty have been teaching an English class to international students attending Oklahoma State University. Their hard work and dedication to teaching has created a much easier cultural transition for the students.

 The students who attend the Stallings’ English class leave with a better understanding of many basic American skills, including how to purchase a car, set up a bank account and the simple structure of conversation.

 “We like having the class because we get to explain things and talk about why there are differences so they have more of an understanding of America, and we have an understanding of where they come from, too!” Rachel said.

 These weekly classes were previously held at the Countryside Baptist Church on the south side of Stillwater, but now take place in the comfort of the Stallings’ home.

“We decided to have the class at our house because a lot of international students don’t ever get to visit or see an American home and really understand American culture,” Rachel said. “So we wanted to give them that experience.”

Rachel’s interest in helping out with the class began after working with a conversational English class in Boston. She spent two summers there working with international students from all different countries. Rachel said there was sometimes a communication barrier with words, but with hand gestures and a little creativity, there was never a problem.

“At first, I was nervous because I didn’t really know how I was going to teach somebody who didn’t speak much English, but after getting into it and building relationships with the people, it was so great!” Rachel said.

 While Rachel was meeting and learning from a diverse group of people in Boston, Monty Stallings was getting to experience the Chinese culture first hand. His multiple trips to China and the Chinese classes taken at OSU influenced Monty to become involved in the English class provided in Stillwater.

 Monty’s current position as Senior Coordinator of OSU Career Services gives him the opportunity to meet international students new to campus. He is able to assist international and graduate students in finding jobs, as well as help with resume building and interview techniques. Monty is also able to create awareness of the English class to new students attending OSU.

 “We don’t do any major advertising,” Monty said. “They (students) do a lot of the advertising themselves, and the class is something that really perpetuates itself.”

 The OSU Career Services mission is to empower all OSU community members with the passion and abilities to achieve their ideal future, according to the Hire OSU Grads Web site. This mission is put into action no better than in Monty and Rachel’s own living room.

 Although the English class is open to all nationalities, the Chinese have slowly become the majority of the people involved. Monty said that Chinese students have always expressed an interest in the class and have taken it upon themselves to help recruit others.

 The Stallings also publicize the class through weekly e-mails sent out as reminders to the students. These messages are visible to members of the OSU Chinese Yahoo group, which is an online group available for Chinese students attending OSU. It provides a way for students to communicate with one another and is a good source of information.

 One member of the OSU Chinese Yahoo group, Dongwei Xu, became a regular student of the Stallings’ English class after learning about it through the messages posted by Rachel and Monty. She has been living in America for three years now and has been attending the English class for about a year and a half.

 Dongwei said that the most beneficial thing she has gained from the class is confidence and friendships with Monty and Rachel, as well as friendships with the other students.

 Many of the other members of the OSU Chinese Yahoo group are just temporarily attending OSU. The majority of these students are working on their master’s, Ph.D., post doc or are even just visiting scholars, Rachel said.

 There are 200 Chinese students enrolled at OSU for the 2010 spring semester. This is the second most represented country at OSU, following India, according to the OSU International Student Statistics Document.

International students have been coming to OSU for years. Many do not realize the cultural differences these students face or the difficulty of assimilating into a completely foreign environment. The international students who have the opportunity to attend the Stallings’ English class are extremely fortunate to have a helping hand in their transition.

 Even after leaving OSU, many of the students continue to keep in contact with Rachel and Monty. Dongwei said that she will always stay in touch with the Stallings, and she hopes to be a guide to them if they ever return to visit China.

The Stallings’ English class is different in many ways from any other college credit class. Besides the ability to attend free of charge, students gain a different type of education. The English class is neither text book based nor for a grade. It is an experience. The students and teachers end every Thursday with a better understanding of one another’s cultures, as well as an understanding of each other as individuals.

 “Doing the English class is a stress reliever, and I always come away feeling really refreshed,” Rachel said. “It’s something not related to work. It’s just spending time with them.”

Rachel and Monty share a similar attitude toward the class. They are both positive and open to anyone interested in joining them on Thursday nights. Ever since they were brought together through mutual interests in teaching, they have continued to set time aside in their busy days to help students acclimate to a new culture.

“No matter what our week is like, no matter how busy it’s been, that’s the one evening that we really get charged for,” Monty said. “The class is just something we started doing as students, and has evolved so much!”

**Sources**

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