



HOME IS WHERE THE
Pard♥Is

International Friendship Program creates lasting bonds

BY HEATHER MAYER IRVINE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAY WEGRZYNOWICZ

Walking onto campus on day one as a first-year student can be terrifying. You're thrown into the unknown, and you have to do your own laundry. Now imagine that feeling for a student who has traveled to Lafayette College from Ghana. Or Morocco. Or China. Or Lithuania.

Lafayette started the International Friendship Program some 20 years ago as a way to help international students feel more at home on a campus thousands of miles away and cultures apart from their families.

"It's tough when you move to another country," says **Janine Block '94**, assistant director of intercultural development and international student advising. "It takes time to not only become familiar with the customs but to make close friends and really feel a part of that community."

The program is not required for international students, but for those who choose to participate, it's life-changing.

"This is the best thing that's ever happened to me since I came over to America," says **Takudzwa Mujuru '21**, a computer science major, who was paired with a community member at the start of his first year. "It's the best thing ever."

Partners include Lafayette faculty and staff, and members of the local community.

"With this program, families get to experience another country, and students get to experience a family's traditions," says Block, who has overseen the program for 17 years.

The relationships forged are long-lasting: five, 10, 15 years and counting.

"We want this to be a rich and rewarding friendship in which the students and partners can develop lifelong relationships," says Block.



↑ Yevenyo and the Jacksons' sons play soccer, one of their favorite activities together.



The Jacksons in front of their house with Yevenyo



Yevenyo and the Jacksons meet Einstein, the Pennsylvania snow camel.



↑ Mujuru and Funari cook falafel for lunch to go with their chicken and rice.



↑ Mujuru and Funari enjoy a walk together.

The Peer

A community partner, **Nate Funari**, 27, has become close friends with Mujuru over the last two years. Mujuru, from Zimbabwe, spent Christmas with Funari and his large Italian family.

"I have six siblings, and that can be overwhelming, but Taku fit right in. He's become part of our family," says Funari.

Mujuru loves to cook with Funari. A favorite? Homemade pasta with fresh tomato sauce. The pair loves to watch *The Office* together too.

"The show was always playing at home, but I don't think I'd find it funny back home," says Mujuru. "It's getting to experience it with this family."

Funari is getting married in June and hopes Mujuru will stand with him as a groomsman, if his internship schedule allows—it's in Zimbabwe.

"This is definitely a lifelong friendship," laughs Mujuru.

The Younger Brothers

Mary Ellen Jackson, director of sponsored research, is a first-time partner and loving every minute. She and her family, including sons Sam (14) and Quinn (13), are hosting **Sena Yevenyo '22** from Ghana.

Yevenyo, who joined the program in hopes that it would help him come out of his shell, has found a second home in the Jacksons' playroom, joining the boys in shooting Nerf guns and playing video games.

"I learned a funny thing about American families and how they interact," he says. "At home, if your parents tell you to do something there's almost no way you can argue your way out of it. It almost feels like an order. But in America, if Mary Ellen tells her sons to do something, she needs to have a legitimate reason. If you don't, then [the kid] shouldn't have to do it."

For Thanksgiving, Yevenyo joined the Jacksons' family in Philadelphia where he demonstrated how to make plantains. On campus, Yevenyo is learning electrical and computer engineering, but with the Jackson family, he learned he prefers tea to coffee and that he didn't enjoy the cold when searching for a Christmas tree.

"Having Sena join our family during the holidays has been very special. Sena and my sons play together and learn from each other, especially about pop culture and Marvel comics, which we discovered are Sena's favorite," says Jackson.

Yevenyo can't emphasize enough the importance of the support Jackson and other partners provide to their students.

"When you're far from home, it can be difficult," he says. "You miss your parents and friends, but if you have someone who's supportive, that really helps. It makes you miss home less."

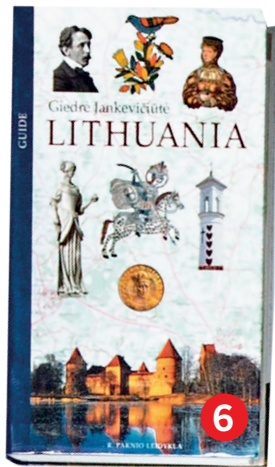
The Proud 'Alumna'

Former Lafayette tennis coach Barb Young and her husband, Jim, are not currently hosting any students, but they remain in touch with their former charges.

Young has visited her three Lithuanian students and their families in Lithuania and visits the students once a year now that they live in the United States.

"Being a partner was one of the most enriching experiences we have ever had," says Young. "The enduring friendships are magical."

Young's house is filled with gifts from her students, including a Lithuanian amber necklace, Lithuanian pottery, and napkins and a linen tablecloth, for which the country is famous.



- 1 Among other things, Lithuania is famous for its candle-making.
- 2 Tomas Bielskis '07, a former student of the Youngs, gifted this amber necklace to Barb.
- 3 Bielskis, Jim, Barb, and Viktorija Gecyte '08 on the rooftop at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia
- 4 Barb and Jim with Rytis Umbrasas '10 at Thanksgiving playing the annual family men vs. women Trivial Pursuit game.
- 5 One of the Youngs' students is a photographer and snapped this photo during a trip to the Met in New York City.
- 6 Barb and Jim have traveled to Lithuania several times to visit their students. This book was a gift from Gecyte to help guide them through the country.
- 7 Barb and Jim cherish this award from the International Student Association for being hosts of the year.
- 8 Lithuania is famous for its linens, and these were gifts from the Youngs' students.

The Mama

Over the years, Sue Herschlag, alumni technology assistant, has partnered with a dozen students. But to call them students would be too informal—they're family.

"All my kids call me Momma Sue," she says.

Herschlag stays in close touch with her kids who have graduated and moved on, and currently, she's hosting four "rascals."

One of her students, **Saad Rehman '22** from Pakistan, was in for quite a surprise when he joined Herschlag for Thanksgiving last year.

"Americans eat a lot during Thanksgiving, like a lot," he says. "I thought it would be a normal meal, but in reality it was a huge feast."

As always, Herschlag aims to make her kids feel right at

home. She's sat with their parents at Commencement, hosted graduation parties, written words of encouragement on sticky notes, and baked cupcakes for birthdays.

"Sue picked me up at the airport, and I spent the first night in America in her house," says **Mirana Randriamanantsoa '21** from Madagascar. "It was a particularly difficult time, but I am glad she was there to host and take care of me. The program definitely helped me in making my first days in a new country smoother."

Even for homebodies, like **Maha Alaoui Hijazi '22** from Morocco, the program gives students a way to get out and explore.

"I didn't feel trapped on campus since I knew I could always ask Susan to take me somewhere, like the store or even New York City," she says. ■



↑ Rehman (above) dressed up for Mardi Gras with Herschlag, Hijazi, and Randriamanantsoa in the downtown Easton parade from Two Rivers Brewing to The Bayou Easton.

Rehman (L-R), Randriamanantsoa, Hijazi, and Herschlag pose with Easton Mayor Sal Panto.