Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: If you enjoy meeting people from other countries and learning about different cultures, consider being a host for the International Friends program at Missouri State University. The program helps international students at Missouri State to develop quality friendships with American families in the area. I'm Emily Yeap.

With me today are Brenda Stewart, International Friends coordinator, and Dr. Mike Burton, an International Friends host and professor in the department of environmental plant science and natural resources at Missouri State. They're here to share highlights about the program.

Stewart.

Brenda Stewart: International Friends is a university-supervised program, where I match community members from all phases of lives with one or more international students. Local community members serve as a welcoming friend by sharing friendships and exchanging cultures. The students remain living on campus or their apartments during their visit. However, the match provides them an opportunity to connect with a local individual. The match relationship is set for a semester-long commitment. Some of the students are here for one semester; others are here for two or even longer, and although the match is just set for one semester, the relationships often extend through the entire stay of the student, and even into lifelong friendships.

Emily Yeap: She explains the value of International Friends for both students and hosts.

Brenda Stewart: Well, the value and the rewards are different for everyone who is involved, but for all, it holds intrinsic rewards that always provide more than one invests with their energy and time. For international students, it helps ease their transition, creates opportunities for cross-cultural learning and friendships, and it reduces any anxiety they may have. Whilst for a host, cross-cultural learning, it’s a form of paying it forward, learning more about another country. They may have a family member who plans to move or visit that country, and it provides them an opportunity to learn more about it.

Emily Yeap: Students who participate in the program come from countries, such as China, Saudi Arabia, India, South Korea and Brazil. Burton, and his wife Susan, have built connections with students from many of those countries since they became International Friends hosts about seven years ago.

Mike Burton: We'd started doing this in large part because of some experiences that we had traveling internationally. We found that when we were welcomed into China for example, we were treated like royalty, and we realized that the degree to which we were befriended and honored while we were traveling was very different from the way that we normally treat visitors from other countries. We find Americans are just caught up in their busyness, and we didn't want international students to come here and not find a friend who was willing to take some time with them, and make sure that they were adjusted, adapted, had the resources that they needed.

Emily Yeap: He shares the types of things his family has done with the students over the years.

Mike Burton: Trips to restaurants, participation in holiday events, dinners once a week, once a month, contact them, make sure that they don't need a trip to the grocery store. Take them to Bass Pro; we've been to the aquarium, and to other things. We really want them to see the parks and beauty of the Ozarks, so trips and traveling with our family or in small groups, is terrific.

Emily Yeap: The experience has been an enriching one for Burton and his family.

Mike Burton: We grow in wonderful ways, and just having some insights and being able to develop friendships ... Some of our students come from troubled parts of the world, some come from First World environments, and we find that the relationships that we develop actually dispel some of the myths that maybe they have grown up being taught about Americans. And we find the reverse is also true.

Emily Yeap: He shares one example that demonstrates this.

Mike Burton: My wife was preparing dinner with two young women from Pakistan. These women were from different religious backgrounds. My wife's a Christian, one of the women was Sunni, and the other Pakistani woman was Shia. So three different religious backgrounds or perspectives that would have been quite different. In fact, it would have been impossible for these two Pakistani women to have had a friendship in their own country. But at Missouri State, and in my kitchen, preparing a meal with my wife, they were friends. And we find that as students, especially one-on-one, have the opportunity to interact with Americans, they can really begin to develop some trust and share their heart, and learn how we're alike, and how we're different. And we find we're far more alike than we are different when we get to that level.

Emily Yeap: To become an International Friends host, complete an online registration form at international.missouristate.edu/friends, and attend an orientation session in the fall. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.