

Street Corners

Around Town

Crossroads Harrisburg Youth the world over find a home at International House

Pat Carroll

Diversity is the norm at International House, where 80 or so foreign and American students will talk and eat and laugh tonight on what used to be a run-down street by the train station.

"It's a small-world kind of thing," said Brad Jones, vice-president for community development with Harristown Development Corp., which has made room for International House in its prominent downtown building at 3rd and Chestnut streets. "We serve as a home — a safe, secure landing for international students to live here in a fully-furnished dormitory style. It's a friendly atmosphere."

Part house mother and part concierge, Virginia Burd is the house manager at I-House. She arrived here from Uruguay as an exchange student, came back to major in business at Shippensburg University and went to work at the Hilton. She worked there for seven years before coming to work at this global dorm.

"It's a lot of fun," she said. "There are a lot of similarities with the hotel industry, but a lot of differences as well. You have students much longer, and you need to be able to help them get used to the culture."

Helping with that are the American students who are roughly half of I-House's population.

"The American students are the ambassadors for the international students," Jones said. "They teach them the ropes, they teach them the culture. For the American students who come here, it's like going around the world without having to leave Harrisburg. They get to meet students from these different countries every day."

Two kinds of students stay at International House. There are students who are taking internships, including work/travel students from overseas, and there are also full-time students who are going to college here.

Through its event programming, International House also reaches out to the community and serves as a platform for foreign visitors like the mayor of a small town in Liberia or the consul general of the Bahamas.

Jones plans for two events a month and then others just happen. "People in the community will call us and say, 'Hey so-and-so is going to be in town. We'd like to bring him by the International House. Could you guys put together a little event for him?'"

Nadine Kim, Harristown's director of development, has put together many of those 250 programs over the past seven years.

"I grew up in Morocco, in a community of people from many regions of the country and people of different origins and nationalities," she said.



Students stroll past International House.

"I missed that environment tremendously when I arrived in the U.S. in 1989. With I-House and its friends, and the many cultural venues in Harrisburg now, I overcame nostalgia ... somewhat."

Harristown, the city's semi-public redevelopment agency, is largely responsible for the suddenly lively atmosphere on Chestnut Street, an area now cheerily designated as part of SoMa — the area south of Market Street. (Yeah, like SoHo in Manhattan.)

Organized in 1974 to revive the little city that drowned in Hurricane Agnes, Harristown has built premier office space downtown and a world-class hotel, the Hilton Harrisburg. But its best work came on Chestnut Street, where old, cold, desolate brick buildings didn't fall to the wrecking ball. They took on new life with Bricco, a fine-dining restaurant; Olewine's Meat and Cheese House, home to some great Pennsylvania cheeses, and Ciao Bakery. The 86 student beds of International House sit comfortably above these businesses.

Around the back is Messiah College's new Harrisburg Institute, which combines urban learning and service with coursework and research. Also in the area: students from the new Harrisburg University building at 4th and Market streets; more students from Temple University's substantial presence at 4th and Walnut; and yet more students — interns from Harrisburg Area Community College at Bricco.

In other words, International House, as a student center, is perfectly positioned. It sits squarely in what is fast becoming Harrisburg's own collegiate neighborhood.

Students Thrive in, Give Back to Community

People from all over the world pass through International House, some as part-time residents, some as speakers. The one thing they share: their stories are always fascinating.

For instance, those who heard Joseph Armstrong Aruldass speak heard from the poorest of the poor, a young man born below the lowest rung of the caste system that still shackles India.

He lives this year in a town famed for its affluence, Camp Hill, where he's a high school exchange student, manager of the soccer team and a member of the varsity baseball team. He hopes to attend college here, become an engineer and return to India to work for his people, the Dalits.

"Formerly known as untouchables, they are the poorest members of Indian society and suffer severe discrimination in education, health care and employment," explained Betsy McCoy, a litigator for the Harrisburg office of Eckert Seamans who volunteers with Dalit Solidarity.

"As my children and I came to know Joseph, we agreed that he would make a wonderful exchange student," she said. They were right. With classes in advanced placement chemistry, 20th-century American history, technology construction, college prep English, Latin and algebra III, he's an honor student.

"It is an opportunity that he never imagined would be possible for him," McCoy said.

She is currently working on a project to establish after-school programs in rural villages in southern India. As part of that program, she runs a service learning program called Service Adventours that offers volunteers the opportunity to work with Dalit children. Interested volunteers can reach her at betsmcc@gmail.com.



I-House speaker Joseph Armstrong Aruldass (left). Betsy McCoy (right), with Dalit children in India.

