

CHICAGO SPOTLIGHT: Home away from home



By: Roland Kulla

I have been hosting fellows for more than 20 years and with WorldChicago for the last 15. When I first started out, I was with a program called Servas (it still exists and I still host for them). It started after World War II as a peace movement with the idea that if you could meet people, you would be less likely to shoot people. You are required to put how much notice you want, you can put two weeks, a week, three days, four days and I always put 'No prior notice required'. So, on a Saturday afternoon I was sitting there in my house and the phone rang. The caller was a twenty-seven-year-old by the nickname Tom, who was travelling around the world, and his mother had joined him for the American leg. They asked to stay with me since their plans fell through. I said 'sure'.

So, they make it on down and I am going to Oak Park that night for a party with my friends and they are big fans of Frank Lloyd Wright. I call my friends and say, "Can I bring somebody?" and they say fine. Tom's mom was tired, so she stayed home, but I bring Tom and he is like the hit of the party. My friends come up after a while and they ask, 'when did you meet this guy?' (I have known these people for a long time and they have never seen Tom before). I say, "Oh, about two hours ago," and then I kind of told them about the program. They say, "What? You let people come and stay in your house?!" and I say "Sure, its only stuff."

And still, my response today is the same as then. I have had hundreds of people come stay with me and I had at least one hundred people come through WorldChicago. In these days when everybody is like battening down the hatches and pulling up the draw bridge in this moat mentality, I choose to be open, I choose to be hospitable. And you know when you think, "what can one person do?" you can welcome people, one or two or three people at a time, which is what I am doing right now. When I moved about ten years ago to the Back of the Yards, I wanted to have a big enough place where I could host people. I have three official bedrooms but now I am also kind of enlisting the air mattress in the studio for a professional exchange alumnus who stayed with me a couple of years ago.

One of the questions I was asked to talk about was, "what kind of impact does this make?" and, "how many host countries have I hosted from?" and I thought I would bring the visual aid to show you. If you think about one person at a time, that is fine, but I always put a dot when I get a new country so it's on this map. (See map in photo below).

I just posted something on Facebook and I already have like 60 responses from all over the world. One of the things I also do is I ask whenever I can host three, send me one from each country. The reason is because these guys come from countries where there has been a lot of violence and a lot of conflict, but here they have a safe space to meet others and start building friendships that transcend the political and social background.



Thank you to all 2018 homestay hosts!