On Campus

Helping International Students Feel at Home in New York

Spring 2002

When Byong-jo Kang and his wife moved from Korea to New York City last summer, they had never before lived in a foreign country and knew not a single person in New York.

Shortly after Kang began classes at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, he heard about the Columbia Alumni Volunteer Mentor Program and filled out an application at the International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO). When Ralph Italie '50C '51GSAS called Kang up a month later to introduce himself as his new mentor, Kang was skeptical. "I had heard that New York was too dangerous a place to believe strangers," he says.

A few months later, the two are anything but strangers. Kang now calls Italie both "a father and a friend" and says his mentor has helped him through many difficult times in both his academic and personal lives. "Without Mr. Italie's help and encouragement," says Kang, "my wife and I could not have enjoyed life so easily in this foreign place where we had no friends and family. He taught us not only about how to cope with new life in New York but also how to enjoy New York."

The mentor program, started two years ago by former Alumni Federation president Bernard Sunshine '46C, has sparked an enthusiastic response from new students—this past fall, more than 100 foreign students requested mentors. Italie, who coordinates the program in association with the ISSO, knows what it's like to feel like a stranger in a new land—he came from the Netherlands in 1948 to study mathematics at Columbia—so he decided to help as many new students as he could. He is now mentor to four students, Kang among them.

In addition to matching mentors with students, the Alumni Federation plays an important role in building a supportive community among the students themselves. Its annual holiday reception for international graduate students brings many of them

together for the first time; this past December, nearly 200 students attended.

Italie says being a mentor is a “labor of love” and adds that the program has had profound payoffs for him personally. “I have found all of the students wonderful to deal with, each in their own way,” he says, “and they all have been most appreciative of the interest shown and the guidance given. It keeps me young.”

Participation from alumni volunteers has yet to catch up with the enthusiastic response from students, and Italie hopes that more alumni volunteers will come forward to help international students feel more at home in New York.



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