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## FlagFriends coordinators Joan and Stan Alf retiring from program

20 hours ago • [Special to the Daily Sun](#)

Ten years ago, a retired couple, Joan and Stan Alf, started FlagFriends (Flagstaff International Friendship Program) to give international students at NAU a chance to learn more about American culture and interact with American families. They are now handing the program to a new volunteer. New program coordinator Tarja "Joy" Knudsen is managing the program and preparing for the intake of spring 2015 students.

Northern Arizona University has more than 1,000 students from other countries and a growing number of foreign faculty members and scholars. Many of these visitors come from countries and cultures that are very different from the U.S., and their images of the United States may be based on one-sided information from their national news services, or films or TV shows about glamorous life in Beverly Hills. At the same time, many Americans living in Flagstaff may have a one-sided and unrealistic image of many other cultures and countries.

This was the challenge tackled by the Alfs when they came to Flagstaff 10 years ago. Joan had been running a similar program at Arizona State University, and Stan had a lot of contacts with international students while working at Mesa Community College.

The program the Alfs started, which they named FlagFriends, consisted of matching students/teachers with families or singles in the local community to share their experience, and practice cultural sharing, with the U.S. family also acting as a valuable resource for international students trying to navigate U.S. culture. In practice, local community members invited students approximately once a month for a dinner, a sports activity, or some other social or cultural activity.

### Difficult start

Getting started in Flagstaff was not easy. As newcomers in Flagstaff, the Alfs did not know many families, and began their program looking for interested families and individuals through the local

churches. They prepared informational material that was displayed at school and church noticeboards as well as in their newsletters.

Although FlagFriends is not an NAU program, the Center for International Education at NAU has been involved in an increasing way through the years. The CIE continues to assist the program coordinators in arranging program matches, providing program material to students and explaining the program during new student orientation, and offering other logistical support.

Over the years, the Alfs have managed to find many Flagstaff residents who joined the program. Some families have welcomed many students from a variety of countries or regions during their years in FlagFriends.

### Get more than give

The purpose of the program is to give American families and international visitors at NAU an opportunity to have a dialogue with somebody from another culture -- to give each other time and a chance to experience and ask questions about normal life in their respective countries. The Alfs said that many true friendships have evolved from these get-togethers between NAU students and local families. The parties have corresponded or visited each other even after the student has left Flagstaff.

With the holidays approaching, FlagFriends is looking for more local participants. Interested families are encouraged to contact Joy Knudsen with inquiries about participating in the program. FlagFriends is not a home-stay program, and involves no financial obligations (other than simply hosting a student for suitable activities agreeable to both parties). Contact Joy at joy.danfin@gmail.com. Alternatively, email the office of International Student and Scholar Services at NAU at iss@nau.edu with inquiries.

### Cultural Extravaganza at Roosevelt

Chicago Sun-Times



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