International Flair

Families from all parts of the world solidify Shaker's reputation as a diverse and internationally minded community. By Nancy O'Connor

Stefanie Jansen traveled from the Netherlands to Cleveland in July 2007 with a “must have” list in hand. Her husband Etienne was being transferred to the Highland Heights office of a Dutch multinational company, Philips, for three years, and the hunt was on for a home for the family.

“On my list was ‘good school district,’ ‘close to facilities’ such as shops, schools, and library, and ‘sidewalks,’ so I could still walk or ride my bike,” says Stefanie, who has two young daughters. Relocation specialists showed the couple several eastside communities but, she says, “Shaker had all the items on my list and more. The beautiful old houses, the trees, and people walking on the sidewalks with dogs and strollers – it just felt like home.”

For Mohammad Irfan, a professor of Mechanical Engineering from Pakistan, the opportunity to do post-doctoral work at Case Western Reserve University on a Fulbright Scholarship meant moving to the Cleveland area with his wife and two school-aged children. For him, the quality of the school district was paramount in deciding where to settle.

“My wife and I searched different websites for school rankings,” he says. “The Shaker Heights public schools were consistently ranked as among the best in Cleveland. Choosing a school for our children, sitting across oceans and continents, was a big leap of faith. So before arriving in Cleveland, we contacted the schools by email and got a very positive response. Upon arrival, we took our children to the school administration and everyone was very friendly to us and made the children feel very comfortable in a foreign land.”

He finds that “Shaker stands out for the diversity in its student population, coming from all over the world. My son is learning Chinese in second grade. That is what I call an international approach to education.”

The Jansens and Irfans are just two of many families from all parts of the world who contribute to Shaker’s international flair and solidify its reputation as a diverse and internationally minded community. In any given year, the Shaker Heights School District enrolls students from more than 40 countries, the children of researchers, business executives, medical professionals, educators, graduate students, and others drawn to the area by Cleveland’s corporate, medical, and higher education institutions.
Walkability

While the quality of schools is among Shaker’s key selling points, the City’s appeal doesn’t stop there. Shaker native Margy Russell Judd, who specializes in “selling” Northeast Ohio as president of Executive Arrangements in Beachwood, says, “Organizations hire us to help create positive first impressions during recruiting or relocation. We help the professionals and their families fall in love with Northeast Ohio, to understand the quality of life available to them here, and to explore what their options are in places to call home.”

Shaker holds particular appeal to Western Europeans, she finds. “They want pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. They are accustomed to walking, biking, and pushing strollers where they need to go. They appreciate Shaker’s urban lifestyle amenities, like having the Rapid a close walk from home and the dining and shopping available at Shaker Square and the Warrensville-Van Aken centers.”

Shaker also attracts those who want neighborhoods with character, she notes. “They are looking for a unique, individual home, not a cookie-cutter development. They take one look at a place like Shaker, with its curb appeal, trees, and winding streets, and it feels good.”

Judd’s two largest clients – The Cleveland Clinic Foundation and University Hospitals – are also the two largest corporate employers in Northeast Ohio. According to the Greater Cleveland Partnership, Cleveland also boasts 11 Fortune 500 companies, another 13 Fortune 1000 companies, and 150 international companies from 25 different countries, contributing to a steady influx of international talent in the region.

Shaker’s Community Information Specialist Judy Steehler is in regular contact with the human resource departments at many of these companies, providing them with Shaker Heights information packets for prospective and relocating employees. She also offers complimentary tours of the City, arranges school visits, and shows rental properties. (Homebuyers are referred to realtors.)

About a third of the 150-200 potential new residents Steehler works with each year are from other countries. Most, she finds, have researched the City online before setting foot in Shaker Heights.
"The Cleveland Clinic, University Hospital's, Case Western, and other employers provide links on their websites to Shaker's site [www.shakernote.com] to help people explore their housing options," Steehler says.

Consequently, she says, many newcomers arrive knowing exactly what they are looking for. "Many of the Asian families, for instance, know they want to settle in the Boulevard area, because of its large international population and proximity to University Circle. For others, living within walking distance to a grocery store is important, as many wives of transplants don’t drive. Close proximity to Family Connections at Shaker Family Center is a priority for some families with small children, who have learned about its playgroups and Learning English as a Family program."

Internet Influence

Glenda Moss, registrar for the Shaker Heights School District, can also attest to the growing influence of the Internet on families moving here from overseas.

"Almost all new families have seen our website [www.shaker.org] and know something about us when they first visit. They are impressed with our school offerings and say they’ve heard we have a great school system."

On the large world map that hangs in the registration office, new families are encouraged to identify their home countries with a push pin. "You'd be hard pressed to find a country anywhere in the world without a pin," Moss says.
Glenda Moss, the Shaker School District's registrar, in her office where a welcome poster greets families in 25 languages.

She is hopeful that more foreign high-school-aged students will choose to spend a year studying in Shaker, now that the District has become authorized to issue special I-20 visas for students. "We have one student from China here this year, living with relatives in Shaker Heights, and another expected to come next fall," Moss says. I-20 visa students pay full tuition and their own personal expenses, and must arrange for their own housing.

Once they arrive, international students and families find Shaker Heights a very hospitable community. Says Stefanie Jansen, "People made us feel welcomed and helped us get acclimated within no time. They invited us for dinner and social get-togethers, and introduced us to other families."

Initially, her daughters Laura, 5, and Audrey, 4, spoke no English. "In Holland, English is taught at schools starting at the age of 12. So the girls' only knowledge of English was some Dora-the-Explorer English. But when they started preschool, they mastered English in only a few months."

Many families take advantage of the English as a Second Language programs offered in Shaker, including free classes at the Shaker Heights Public Library and Family Connections. (See sidebar.) Each public school building also offers ESL instruction to help students quickly gain the communication skills they need.
English Made Easy

A number of free language programs are available to Shaker’s international residents who desire to strengthen their English skills.

FOR STUDENTS:

• Each Shaker Heights public school building offers the services of a specialist in English as a Second Language (ESL) who works with students to help them become proficient as quickly as possible. The ESL teachers structure classes around the needs of their students, depending on their strengths and the areas where they need more practice.

FOR ADULTS:

• English in Action class for adults meets Tuesday evenings, 7-9 pm at Shaker Heights Public Library, 16500 Van Aken Boulevard. For more information, call (216) 991-2030.
• Free English class for adults meets Tuesday mornings from 10-11:30 am at Plymouth Church, 2860 Coventry Road. For more information, contact Ellen Potter, (440) 247-6146.

FOR FAMILIES:

• Learning English As a Family (LEAF) meets Monday evenings from 6:40-8 pm at Family Connections at Shaker Family Center, 19824 Sussex Road. A home visit program is also available. Call (216) 921-2023 for more information.

According to Family Connections Director Joanne Federman, the value of an ESL program can go beyond language acquisition. "In our Learning English As a Family classes, we also educate international families about community and area resources and American customs and holidays, and we help them know what to expect when entering Shaker schools," Federman says.

Family Connections also facilitates networking and friendship-building through its toddler play groups, open gym sessions, and social events, including an annual International Potluck Dinner.

However long their stay in the States, finding a global-minded community like Shaker Heights is a godsend for many international families.

"Cleveland, with its Midwest values, is a well-kept secret when it comes to a high-quality standard of life while raising a family," says Jansen. "Shaker Heights offers beauty, good schools, and an international-oriented community with a lot of young families. We signed an assignment contract for, in principle, three years -- but hopefully we will end up staying longer."

English in Action program at the Shaker Library. Maria D. Valadez, Mexico.