

Global Family

HOW A ST. PAUL COUPLE SIGNED UP TO HOST ONE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AND FOUND THE WORLD.

BY | MARK WOLLEMAN

We were sitting in a Sofia, Bulgaria, coffee shop in early June, sharing a few laughs with **Ekaterina “Kate” Petrova ’03** about her introduction to the diversity of Macalester College. She was remembering herself as a first-year student, having just said goodbye to her parents, who were heading back overseas.

“I was crying and I met another girl in the hallway of our dorm who was also crying,” Kate said. “I told her, ‘I know ... my parents just left, too.’”

“She asked: ‘Where are they going?’ And I told her that my mom was going back to Kuwait and my dad was heading to Kazakhstan. And then I asked her where her parents were going.”

“Duluth.”

We heard similar stories during our recent five-week family trip that reconnected us with our international “children” in Europe. Kate’s anecdote was about culture shock, sure, but also about the challenges international students routinely encounter and overcome during their years at Macalester College, with a little help in some cases from Twin Cities host families.

* * * * *

First, some background: Our family—me, my wife, Melody Gilbert, and our 3-year-old daughter, Jenna—moved into the Macalester neighborhood in 1992. Before arriving in Minnesota, we’d lived in Florida, California, and New York, so we were looking for something to connect our little family to the community. When I say “we,” I really mean Melody. She grew up in Washington, D.C., and had been a world traveler from an early age. She and her family developed lasting friendships with people from different countries and cultures, so when she heard about Mac’s Host Family Program, she was immediately drawn to it.

I was slower to warm up to the idea. I was working long hours, mostly at night, as a sports editor at the *Star Tribune* and wasn’t sure how much of my life I was willing to share with strangers. I had lots of questions: Who are these students? Where are they from? How will they react to our modest St. Paul home? What do they want from us?

But my mild resistance was no match for Melody, a documentary filmmaker who coaxes even the most reluctant subjects to share their stories on camera. Because she was determined to give our daughter the kind of international experience she’d enjoyed as a child, I had no choice but to acquiesce.

So it was that in the fall of 1993 we were matched with our first



Photos from a European trip (clockwise from top): Cruising the Aegean outside Bodrum, Turkey, are (from left) Jenna Wollemann, Sinan Arel ’00, Melody Gilbert, and Mark Wollemann; the Wollemann/Gilbert family in Tallinn, Estonia, with Siim Soplepmann ’09; Melody with bride Marie Deschamps ’04, groom Stephan Chiche, and Matilda Svensson ’04 at Marie and Stephan’s summer 2010 wedding; Hanna Kalla ’97 (in black) and Arndis Osk Jonsdottir ’97 with then-preschooler Jenna and a buck killed by Wollemann’s brother, northern Wisconsin, 1993.



PHOTOS BY | MELODY GILBERT



Our family now includes at least 13 Macalester international students, and our Macalester network continues to grow.



student, **Hanna Kalla '97**, a young woman from Finland who'd spent part of her childhood in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Switzerland while her father worked for the United Nations. Hanna's soft-spoken grace and intelligence were disarming. It didn't hurt that my mother is 100 percent Finn and speaks the language. When Hanna visited my parents a few months later, she and my mom communicated in Finn and I was charmed by their connection. Hanna even gave her blessing to the Finnish sauna my father had constructed next to their northern Wisconsin home.

My defenses down, Melody seized on the opportunity to adopt another student the next year—**Arndis Osk Jonsdottir '97** from Iceland. Arndis, who had lived and worked in Minnesota before enrolling at Macalester, was outspoken, opinionated, and a little wild. Our first outing was to the State Fair where, on a whim, she and I rode the ejector seat. This giant slingshot propels a two-seat chair, attached by bungee cords, high into the sky before sending its riders plummeting toward earth. As luck would have it, a video camera was attached to the seat, capturing my bug-eyed howls and Arndis's colorful commentary.

Later that fall, Hanna and Arndis joined us for our annual Thanksgiving trip to Wisconsin, where we feasted on turkey, gave thanks for our good fortune, and warmed up the sauna for bathing and bonding. The two of them had become fast friends (and remain

This page: Jenna (back to camera) and Hanna Kalla '97 share a joyful reunion in England as Arndis Jonsdottir '97 and Mark look on; facing page: Melody and Jenna at a British train station with Hanna (in black), Arndis, and Hanna's daughter, Sophia.

so today) and quickly became part of our family. They didn't even flinch when, upon awakening the next morning, they wandered outside only to find the large buck my younger brother had just killed as part of Wisconsin's annual deer-hunting season.

And so it went, year after year, student after student. Many of our kids traveled with us to Wisconsin for Thanksgiving feasts and sauna visits. Some ate turkey and pumpkin pie before retreating to a quiet corner to study. Others enjoyed just being part of a family during a holiday. On one such

* * * * *

Over time, we became like many other families with multiple children. We stored boxes and suitcases in our basement. We hosted dinners and brunches for our children and their friends. We visited local restaurants. We made trips to the airport (many) and to Target (even more). We visited various stores and garage sales to buy

and then haul furniture and appliances. On one of my last furniture runs, **Siim Soplepmann '09** and I drove to a distant suburb for a futon and frame. We had to take the furniture apart just to get it out of the seller's house and into the car. On the drive back to campus, Siim and I held on tightly as the unwieldy frame hung precariously out the back of the car, swaying as snow blew in through the open hatchback. But, hands cramping and arms sore, we made it, as we always did.

Our family now includes at least 13 Macalester international students, and our Macalester network continues to grow. We have host family grandkids (two, with another on the way) and we've welcomed several new sons- and daughters-in-law. One of our first students, **Tim Mak '99**, has lived in China for many years but his former St. Paul housemate, **Amanda Becker '99**, now works with Melody in the documentary film industry.

As Melody had hoped, our daughter Jenna, now 21, is an accomplished world traveler. As our trip began last May, she had just completed a semester program in Belgium, visiting 16 countries in six months, and making friends from near and far. Her presence in Europe gave us the perfect excuse to travel. So off we went, on a trip we hoped would rekindle our relationships with our Mac "kids."

* * * * *

This wasn't an ordinary European vacation. We'd spent months lining up travel plans, consulting work schedules, and coordinating housing arrangements. We reconnected with families who had stayed with us over graduation weekends and with students who had shared their lives with us. We found successful young men and women who sang the praises of their college experience. **Marie Deschamps '04**, now living in Paris, said, "Macalester isn't the kind of school that tries to tell you what to think or do. It opened up our minds to all sorts of ideas." Including, it would seem, the idea



AN INTERNATIONAL FAMILY

HERE ARE THE hosted students the Wollemann/Gilbert family have remained close to, in some cases long after their graduation from Macalester. Students listed with an asterisk* were not officially hosted, but somehow managed to become part of the family anyway.

Hanna Kalla '97, Finland

CURRENT LOCATION: Guildford, England (near London)
FAMILY: Married, 2-year-old daughter, Sofia and 5-month-old son, Luca
ADDITIONAL DEGREES: Master's degree in intercultural communications and public relations; PhD in organizational communications
EMPLOYMENT: Senior consultant, Hill & Knowlton, London

Arndis Osk Jonsdottir '97, Iceland

CURRENT LOCATION: Reykjavik, Iceland
FAMILY: Engaged, 10-year-old son, Tomas
ADDITIONAL DEGREES: Master's in organizational psychology
EMPLOYMENT: Self-employed as a consultant and leadership coach, working in many countries

Tim Mak '99, Canada

LOCATION: Singapore
FAMILY: Engaged
ADDITIONAL DEGREES: SAIS program, Johns Hopkins University
EMPLOYMENT: Law student at Singapore Management University

Sinan Arel '00, Turkey

CURRENT LOCATION: London
FAMILY: Married in June 2010
EMPLOYMENT: Executive director, J.P. Morgan, Emerging Markets

Marilena Ioannidou '01, Cyprus

LOCATION: Limassol, Cyprus
ADDITIONAL DEGREE: MBA

Geoff Mak '01* (Tim Mak's brother), Canada

LOCATION: Toronto
EMPLOYMENT: City of Toronto, Exhibition Place, Account Executive

Ekaterina Petrova '02, Bulgaria

LOCATION: Sofia, Bulgaria
ADDITIONAL DEGREES: Master's in European politics and governance, London School of Economics
EMPLOYMENT: Editor for online travel magazine *BalkanTravellers.com* and freelance journalist

Tomas Peshkatari '04, Albania

LOCATION: New York
EMPLOYMENT: The Carlyle Group, senior associate

Matilda Svensson '04, Sweden

LOCATION: Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo
ADDITIONAL DEGREES: Master's in law, development, and globalization from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
EMPLOYMENT: Associate protection officer, UNHCR

Marie Deschamps '04*, France

LOCATION: Paris
FAMILY: Married in July 2010
EMPLOYMENT: Self-employed artist

Maxence Paris '05*, France

LOCATION: Paris
ADDITIONAL DEGREES: Working on an MA in cinematography from the Ecole Normale Supérieure Louis Lumière.
EMPLOYMENT: Europacorp, script reviewer

Anja Witek '08, Germany

LOCATION: St. Paul
EMPLOYMENT: Starbucks; volunteer organizer for the IWW Starbucks workers' union

Siim Soplepmann '09, Estonia

LOCATION: Tallinn, Estonia
ADDITIONAL DEGREES: Diploma from the Estonian School of Diplomacy in International Relations and European Integration
EMPLOYMENT: Sales manager for a hotel coordinator



This page (clockwise from above): Mark (far right) and friends enjoy a sauna in Tartu, Estonia; Mark fishing with Pavlo Peshkatari, father of Tomas Peshkatari '04; Mark and Melody in their St. Paul home; facing page: the Wollemann/Gilbert family with Ekaterina "Kate" Petrova '02 in her apartment overlooking Sofia, Bulgaria.

BOTTOM PHOTO: SHER STONEMAN

of incoming first-years finding refuge and lifelong friendship with their Minnesota families.

I don't know if our family's experience with this program is unique. After all, the Friends of Macalester International Students Host Family Program has been in place for 30 years and has involved around 150 families and 200 students. But I know our experience has been important to us.

* * * * *

Our journey began in Estonia, home of the Soplemanns, who stayed with us when Siim graduated in 2009. Siim and his parents, Jaan and Pille, showed off their culture- and history-rich country during five days of sightseeing, even inviting us to enjoy a night of Estonian sauna sitting in temperatures exceeding 212 degrees Fahrenheit. We couldn't help but recall Siim's visit to Wisconsin and the Wollemann sauna, which he said "felt like home." We arrived in Tallinn just days after his graduation from the Estonian School of Diplomacy, where he was the student speaker at commencement ceremonies. And we stayed long enough to sample a traditional Estonian feast, prepared by Siim's grandmother.

Next we traveled to Istanbul, where **Sinan Arel '00** greeted us warmly, despite his wedding being just three weeks away. Sinan, ex-

ecutive director for emerging markets with JP Morgan in London, spends one week a month in Istanbul and has an apartment in both cities. After our stop in Istanbul, we flew to Bodrum, Turkey, where we floated on the Aegean for three days on his family's boat and talked about world politics, international conflict, and his lifelong love of the sea. We laughed when Sinan remembered thinking how old I was when we first met (mid-thirties) and how he's now the same age.

Sinan, like all the students we visited, waved off our expressions of gratitude. "You did so much for us while we were at Macalester," he said, "it is our pleasure to return the favor." In fact, as we pulled back into port and said our goodbyes, Sinan said he was just happy we had seen his country as he saw it. "I wanted you to see my Turkey ... all the good things that it has," he said. "When you go back and share that with your family, with your friends, then I've done my job."

Each succeeding step along the journey was filled with natural beauty, incredible history, and a mixture of pride and awe as we re-connected with these accomplished young adults whom we had first met as eager college freshmen years before.

There was Kate (**Ekaterina Petrova '03**), now a journalist and editor in Sofia, Bulgaria, who travels widely, writes vividly, and has earned a degree from the London School of Economics. She helped us navigate the streets of Sofia and three days of lost luggage. At one



point during our stay, Melody noticed Jenna and Kate sitting next to each other in a coffee shop. These two “only children” looked, to a mother’s eye, like sisters, thanks to their Macalester connection.

In Albania, Pavllo and Mira Peshkatari showed us the countryside and introduced us to, among other things, fresh fish for breakfast. Their son **Tomas Peshkatari '04** was stuck at work in New York, so it was left to his parents—who had stayed with us during Tomas’s graduation—to show us around. The Peshkataris, whose English was about as good as our Albanian, gave us a grand tour of their country’s heritage and natural beauty (seaside mountains, beautiful beaches, azure seas), and we reveled in our mutual affection for their son.

In Paris, we found **Marie Deschamps '04**, now an artist, who, like Sinan, was busy putting the finishing touches on her forthcoming wedding. Nevertheless, she somehow found the time to prepare a French feast for us. We toasted her coming nuptials with her fiancé, Stephan Chiche, while savoring a delicious bottle of the same wine they’d serve a few weeks later at their wedding. Marie had joined our ever-expanding family because of her friendship with her first-year roommate **Matilda Svensson '04**, our official international student that year. As their college years wound down, they became like sisters, much as Hanna and Arndis had years earlier.

Matilda, now working for the United Nations in the Democratic

Republic of the Congo, couldn’t join us in Paris, but three weeks later, after Jenna and I had returned to the United States, Melody reunited with them both at Marie’s wedding in Marseilles, a sweet conclusion to her trip.

* * * * *

After Paris, we met up with **Arndis Jonsdottir '97** (a consultant and leadership coach in Reykjavik, Iceland) and **Hanna Kalla '97** in England. Hanna filled our bellies with an American-style backyard barbecue in the London suburb of Guilford, and touched our hearts when she told us: “You spent years taking care of us; it’s our turn now.” Hanna, a senior consultant with public relations firm Hill & Knowlton who is expecting her second child, beamed as she watched Jenna play with her 2-year-old daughter, Sophia.

A few days after we had waved goodbye to Hanna and Sophia and returned home, we received an email: “I have a set of your house keys I’ve been hanging on to for years. Shall I mail them back to you?”

No, Hanna, that’s quite all right. You can use them the next time you come “home” to Minnesota. **M**

MARK WOLLEMAN is a sports editor at the [Minneapolis] Star Tribune.