

# Interfaith community reaches out to support foreign workers with dinner

By Brian Bushard  
bbushard@inkym.com

At 11 a.m., Ciera McMullen and Kirsten Jennings head in to work, where they make sandwiches at Something Natural on Cliff Road. It's 3,000 miles from their home in Northern Ireland.

Instead of working for the summer at a shop outside Queen's University in Belfast, where they just finished a semester of college, Jennings and McMullen boarded a plane to Boston. They had applied for U.S. J-1 student visas through a British travel company, and found jobs on Nantucket.

They started working in June.

"It's not like anything I've ever done before," Jennings said. "I've traveled around Europe on trains, but when you're working abroad, you have a sense of independence to go on bike rides and learn a new place. And here, the pay is way better. I was getting 8 (British) pounds an hour there (just under \$10), versus \$15 here, with tips. A lot of people are here to save up for college, which is what we're doing. And we want to travel."

Behind the counter in the garden center at Bartlett's Ocean View Farm, Allie Strange is potting flowers and succulents. Her home in New South Wales, Australia, is more than 10,000 miles away.

She came to the island in March on a J-1 visa. Leaving friends and family in Australia was a difficult decision she made only because of her love of travel.

"It was hard. I've traveled before, but never worked abroad. Everyone who comes here knows it's hard to be away from home. All we can do is meet a lot of people. You have to get out," she said.

"It's great we have a little community at Bartlett's, where so many people meet other people. But you have to go out to restaurants and just meet people. Everyone's doing the same thing."

Jennings, McMullen and



Photo by Brian Bushard

Sarah de Courcy is an Irish student working at Something Natural on a J-1 visa.

Strange are among the 500 students who come to the island each summer on a J-1 visa, often called a student visa, in search of a temporary job. They find work in places like Something Natural, Stop & Shop, Bartlett's and a number of other businesses around the island.

Unitarian Universalist Church Rev. Linda Simmons in recent years noticed an increasing number of students coming to Nantucket. They work around the island, but had no place to all come together, or meet other people in the community, she said.

Three years ago, she came up with the idea of putting on a party for them at Brant Point. The idea was that the students could not only get to know each other, but learn more valuable information about everything from housing opportunities to public transportation.

Having those conversations was important for Matt Fee, who owns Something Natural, and employs and houses several J-1 students. He's seen many living in substandard conditions.

"Sometimes they're in a

room in a basement without windows and no heating, and they come to me, saying they can't live there, and want to see if they could work here," Fee said.

The parties at Brant Point continued, and last year, Simmons estimated 70 students showed up on the beach, an increase from around 40 the year before.

This year, she helped create the Nantucket International Student Outreach Program, along with former St. Mary's Rev. Tom Ryan, and Max Wolf, of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, to organize not only that party, but a series of dinners for J-1 students that continue throughout the summer.

"It's helping J-1 students get settled, be safe and get to know the community," Simmons said. "We said, 'what else can we do to make these people feel welcome, and to increase our understanding of them and their understanding of us, and create a community network and bond.' So we built these dinners."

"We wanted to welcome them to make them feel at home," Wolf added. "This is to give them safety tips, tips on Lyme disease, providing lights and bicycles and information on walk-in clinics at the hospital."

But Sarah De Courcy, an employee at Something Natural, knew what to expect coming to Nantucket. She grew up in Dublin, but spent last summer working on a J-1 visa at a summer camp in Des Moines, Iowa. Before that, she worked for several months in India, and spent the winter working at a cheese shop in Dublin.

She chose Nantucket as her next spot after her brother's girlfriend told her about it.

"She said it was a good place to stay and earn a bit of money," De Courcy said. "If I was having to pay for petrol (gas), then I might not come. But working here, riding a bike, it's easier to save money. If I wasn't working here, I

wouldn't have come."

Each year, the U.S. government accepts more than 300,000 students with a proficiency in English from around the world to work several months in towns and cities around the country, according to the State Department. Many of the places they end up are in resort destinations, from Bar Harbor, Maine, to Block Island, R.I., to Lake George, N.Y.

Many who come to Nantucket stay through August.

"They're extraordinary people who have a tremendous understanding of the world and their sense of place," Simmons said.

"When someone from Brazil and someone from Uzbekistan get to sit together, eating sandwiches and watching the sunset, realizing they have something in common, that's amazing. There's so much conflict in the world, and if we can build our own small international connections, that's great."

A lot of the food at the dinners came from donations from Stop & Shop and the Nantucket Interfaith Council, an outreach Simmons said. The Coast Guard Spouses Association donated several new bikes for incoming students earlier this year, as well.

Strange uses one of those bikes. Coming to a new place, far from home, was a concern for her when she left Australia in March. Creating a sense of camaraderie among co-workers and other community members is important if you want to live and work somewhere foreign for any period of time, she said. The dinners have helped with that.

"I feel lucky I was given an opportunity to come here," she said. "You can go to a country and not know anyone for six months. But because people are all in the same boat and no one really knows too many people, we're all trying to hang out and get to know each other."