

Stouffville welcomes teen from the Netherlands

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Correspondent

Pieterdine Schilthuis, 19, recently arrived in Stouffville from the Netherlands to take part in the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) International Visitor Exchange Program.

"It's for people around the world who want to come to North America to work for a year," explained Schilthuis. "There are 65 people (involved) — five are in Ontario and I'm the only one here in Stouffville."

The exchange program promotes international friendships between young people, particularly Mennonites, and gives them an opportunity to learn about different cultures, languages, attitudes and working conditions.

"This program offers a great opportunity for young people to broaden their horizons and views, to stretch their minds, to make new international friends, to exchange ideas on religion, education (and) working methods, to learn a new language — or get more fluent — and to learn to understand themselves and others better," explained Gerald Reesor, the local IVEP coordinator.

Schilthuis will spend six months living in Stouffville and working at the Care and Share Shoppe, which is her sponsor, "and then I will go somewhere else in Canada for six months, probably out west," she said.

"They do try to get you to two different areas," said Reesor. In some cases, however, participants, or trainees, remain in the same location throughout the year.

"You have to choose in October whether you want to stay for the full year or whether you want to switch."

The program, which is partly self-financing, involves the sponsor, who provides employment for the trainee and a host, who supplies accommodation and meals, welcoming the young person as part of the family.

Visitors work approximately 40

hours a week in their chosen vocation and are treated as apprentices rather than hired help. In addition to providing a job, the sponsor also pays the trainee's room and board, gives him or her spending money and pays MCC for overheads such as transportation and medical costs.

Host and sponsor work together to introduce their guest to the church and to help establish contact with people in the community. "First I came to Pennsylvania for the orientation, which was about three days, then I travelled to Ontario," said Schilthuis.

Although she has been in Stouffville for just a few weeks, she is already enjoying the experience. "Everything is bigger here. The first day I came I went to Niagara Falls and went on the Maid of the Mist."

She was impressed with the falls, "but my shoes got wet," she said, with a smile.

She has visited St. Jacob's and was invited to spend Labour Day weekend with some new friends. "I went to volleyball on Monday evening at the Missionary Church and met some young people there."

Schilthuis completed high school in May. "I came here because I didn't know what I wanted to do or what to study, so I took a year off."

After months spent organizing her trip, "I was ready to leave, but it was hard for my parents. I was the youngest — I have one brother and he studies at university. He was a trainee a few years ago on the same program in B.C."

And although she is sometimes "a little bit homesick," the prospect of the year ahead fills her with enthusiasm. "I'm looking forward to the leaves changing and the snow in the winter."

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