

Global perspective

John Carroll's International Program paves a two-way street on awareness

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BEL AIR – Student government at The John Carroll School last spring included another lesson in cultural differences for Jason Yan.

“I was running for member-at-large in our National Honor Society election,” Yan said. “I voted for another candidate, and lost by two votes. If I had voted for myself, we would have tied.”

“In China student government, you are not supposed to vote for yourself. You’re supposed to be ‘humble.’ Deep down, I’m still Chinese, but I’m adapting, slowly, steadily.”

Yan, a member of the class of 2022 at the only Catholic high school in Harford County, shared that experience last May. His affability and command of the language stand in stark contrast to the unsure boy “who could

barely form a sentence in English” in the summer of 2018, when he entered John Carroll’s International Program.

The program, which had 25 students from nine foreign nations for the 2020-21 school year, furthers the school’s mission, according to its website, “to develop students who will embrace opportunities and excel as leaders in our global society.”

The program is under the direction of Larry Hensley, dean of student services. He came to John Carroll in 2004, when the program was under the direction of Sandi Seiler. It has come to include both host families and on-campus dormitories in St. Joseph Hall – and many adaptations since the COVID-19 pandemic upended life in March 2020.

The majority in the program hail from China, like Yan, a native of Suzhou, west of Shanghai, whose mother works for Stanley Black and Decker in Towson. While he has the benefit of living with family, for some of his peers,



Jason Yan, left, and Darvin Figueroa Cortes, from China and Honduras, respectively, shown last June, are rising seniors in the International Program at The John Carroll School in Bel Air.



Jason Yan, renowned for his ability to solve a Rubik's Cube, shows his Advanced Placement Calculus teacher, Courtney Von Lange, techniques on solving the block puzzle.

remote learning in 2020-21 meant remaining in the nation of 1.4 billion people.

“Half of them could not get back into the country this past year,” said Hensley, who mentioned visa issues and safety concerns. “It was a challenge for faculty to record and provide assignments to our students. When it’s 8 a.m. here, it’s 8 p.m. in China. By 10, those students were allowed to sign off and go to bed. The remainder of their classes required a lot of coordination.”

All of which delivered residual benefits for students from, for example, Fallston, who got lessons in geography, let alone an education in the Gospel message to welcome the stranger.

Already a leader in Holocaust awareness programs that educate students from other high schools in the Baltimore area, John Carroll’s International Program also serves to combat anti-Asian hate, which spiked as some voices with prominent platforms took to calling COVID-19 the “Wuhan Virus.”

Yan said he has never heard anything

suggesting racism during his time at John Carroll. Darvin Figueroa Cortes, a native of Honduras, also said he has not experienced xenophobia, other than an off-campus incident last April, when his father was in town and a passerby told them to “speak English.”

In addition to English and Spanish, Cortes has studied French and Portuguese, the latter online, with help from one of his friends in Brazil.

“That’s a great way to put it into practice,” Cortes said.

He spoke with affection for his host family, Beverly and Ron Adams, “who



Darvin Figueroa Cortes wants to remain in the United States for undergraduate and perhaps graduate studies, with an eye toward possibly becoming a neurosurgeon.

accepted me as part of the family,” including gifts under the Christmas tree.

Cortes is from Siguatepeque, a city of 150,000 in a deeply Catholic nation. On the other hand, Yan knew little about the faith when he arrived.

“Mass is something I would never experience back in China,” he said. “Being in the chapel, let’s call it a time of holiness. In my regular routine, there are days I don’t have time to think.”

Yan, 17, is already accomplished in robotics, and dreams of attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Carnegie Mellon or the University of California at Berkeley.

Cortes, whose father has worked as a civil engineer around the United States, aspires to be a physician, and study neurology or cardiology. Had the 16-year-old attended high school in Honduras, he said, he might not be considering Ivy League schools, or The Johns Hopkins University, or colleges in California.

Those dreams do not come cheap, as room and board for students living on campus, Hensley said, means “they



Darvin Figueroa Cortes, left, plays cornhole with classmate Alex Stewart.

are paying a substantial amount more than our domestic students.”

Their presence, meanwhile, fuels an urge to explore and understand among local teens.

“It’s humbling, a reminder that you aren’t at the center of the universe and there’s so much more to the world than Bel Air,” said Jeremy Biggerman, a Harford Countian and member of the class of 2022. “I’ve met kids from Turkey and the Democratic Republic of Congo and Great Britain. Each of them has a unique story, and an individual sense of culture and personality, that’s cool to learn about. When they show things about their home, you think, ‘I’d love to go there.’

“They make John Carroll a better place, without a doubt.” ●