

On the Path to International Parenthood - An interview with Christine Edwards

Kate Pugnoli
June 14, 2017



Born as a [Big Apple](#) baby, Christine’s parents moved from Manhattan, NY to Princeton, New Jersey when Christine was only four. Her mother was from Switzerland and her father, an African American, was from Washington, D.C. The move to Princeton was sparked by a magazine article that Christine’s mother had read which indicated that Princeton was more accepting of interracial couples; that was a motivating factor, as in the late 1950s and early 1960s interracial marriages were often frowned on.

Christine earned her undergraduate degree at [SUNY in Purchase, NY](#) where she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts with a double major in graphic arts and dance. While at school she encountered the [Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles \(CARP\)](#), a student outreach program associated with the [Unification Church](#). She became increasingly active with CARP and after a couple years her involvement led to an opportunity to attend the [Unification Theological Seminary \(UTS\)](#).

Says Edwards, “I was really grateful to attend UTS because I didn’t grow up going to church and had no religious background. My grandparents had been followers of [Rudolph Steiner](#), a mid-19th century Austrian philosopher, and I read the Bible three times on my own, so I had many independent views of religion. As a student at UTS, I was very inspired by the fact that our professors were from many different faiths.”



Two of the highlights of her time at UTS were the emphasis on interfaith studies and the opportunity to delve more deeply into psychology. As a child of a multi-racial couple, she deeply appreciated and valued the virtue of tolerance and had many opportunities at UTS to participate in activities that promoted the

seminary's purpose of "bridging religious and cultural divides." She was inspired by the opportunity to learn about other faiths. "Our World Religions class was the most important to me. I also enjoyed studying psychology with Dr. McMahon; I felt there were so many wonderful professors at UTS." Although she didn't know it at the time, both the World Religions classes and the counseling courses would serve her well in the future as a house mother to students from many nations.

Christine made a number of good friends while a student at UTS; many of whom she is still closely connected to despite being separated by many miles and years.

After graduating from UTS Christine headed to New York City where she found work in the art department of the [New York City Tribune](#). In addition to doing illustrations for news articles and feature stories, she also helped to lay out news pages. Edwards was able to leverage her many connections with other illustrators at the paper to pursue further work opportunities. A close friend connected her with a local publishing house and over the next few years she worked at [Paragon House](#) as well as a variety of jobs including a stint with a map company, a well-known advertising firm and eventually at the [Manhattan Center](#) where she drew on her experience as a dancer to help manage the stage and lighting for a variety of performing artists.

Edwards was particularly gratified for the opportunities where she was able to use her talents to support projects that reflected her concern for the less fortunate. A close friend and fellow seminarian, Kati Brisebois, had initiated the Orphans Project in Romania and asked Christine to create a logo for the Sunshine Farm Project, a school in Romania. Christine also won a competition to feature a collage in an art museum exhibit that opened at the [University of Bridgeport](#) in Bridgeport, CT. Both these experiences gave her hope that she could also find a way to weave her artistic talents into her future work. "I felt this was a talent given to me by God and I could offer my art for a higher purpose," states Edwards. Although she has continued to do free-lance art work, her life took a very different turn after leaving the East Coast.



The year of 1998 represented a huge shift when Christine went to join her husband in Portland, Oregon. Randy already had work, but as Christine was seeking employment, a friend of theirs mentioned that a local university was looking for host families for foreign students; Randy and Christine agreed that the extra income would bolster their finances.

What started as a way of producing income swiftly blossomed into a vocation-oriented project – one which continues after 17 years of heart felt investment. (Although the couple never had children of their own, their "adopted" children from around the world number in the hundreds.)

The first wave of students came from Japan and were followed by students from Korea, Thailand and Taiwan. Having already worked closely for many years with Japanese and Koreans, the cultural appreciation for and understanding of these students was second nature and the couple easily embraced them.

In addition to providing comfortable housing, home cooked dinners every evening, a listening ear and being on the spot to problem solve, they also took their students on field trips which included excursions

to parks, picnics, free concerts and movies. Randy assisted students with their [ESL studies](#) and Christine found a variety of ways to make students feel at home.



Students continued to arrive from around the world including from Germany, Brazil and Panama to name a few. When students began to arrive from Middle Eastern nations, particularly from Saudi Arabia, Christine capitalized on her study of World Religions at UTS. In addition to having read all the texts required by the course, during her summer break at UTS Christine had independently read the entire Koran so she was familiar with the scriptures of the Muslim faith to an even greater depth.

Students from the Muslim countries were impressed that Christine and her husband were at ease fielding questions about religion and conversing comfortably about Islam. Says Edwards, “I had put up a variety of artifacts and images around the house that represented different religions. In one room there was a tile with a well-known Arabic script and one morning an excited student came running down the stairs happily repeating the phrase on the tile: “There is no God, but God.” These small, but thoughtful touches allowed students to feel at home while far away from their own countries. On the other hand, it was sometimes a challenge for a student to see a depiction of the [Last Supper](#) in the kitchen right next to Hinduism’s [Lord Shiva](#) or a Buddhist [Mandala](#). There is even a reproduction of a miniature Persian painting on the refrigerator depicting an illustrated scene from the scriptures of the [Zoroastrian](#) faith.



The students warmed to Christine's tolerance and welcoming attitude towards the numerous faiths gathered together under one roof. Although the husband and wife team were aware they would need to address a variety of cross cultural issues, they were usually prepared; much more so than many of the students who had never really received any orientation of how to adjust to Western culture. Students frequently wanted to stay in their comfort zone by continuing the traditions and life of their homeland. One student simply refused to learn to use utensils for eating food, he insisted on using only his hands. Christine sometimes had to carefully gauge which male students could take direction from her regarding doing small tasks in the home.

Christine remembers with fondness that several students attended their legal wedding in Portland including four Japanese students, a Saudi and a Korean. The Korean girl held the train of Christine's wedding gown and the young Saudi recited a blessing in Arabic.



“There are so many stories. We had a young woman from Japan who would return to the house after being in classes all day. After she finished her homework, she would come out of her room and eagerly ask how she could assist me in cleaning the house. She was so helpful, as a daughter would be.” Another young woman, whom Christine suspected might not have a close relationship with her mother, was beyond grateful when Christine took her on a simple outing to go shopping for clothes.

Over the years there have been numerous incidents that were both amusing and occasionally confusing. Traditionally, it was more routine for the Asian students to offer gifts for special occasions, but atypical for the Saudis. But one Saudi student became very close to the couple and his parents sent Christine seven different traditional ethnic dresses: another Middle Eastern student gifted Randy with a complete outfit replete with flowing white robes and head dress. When the couple were invited to a big picnic in which they were the only non-Saudis present, they both wore their traditional outfits. One of the Saudi student's friends leaned over to Christine and suggested that it was time to get a second wife for her husband, Randolph!

But it wasn't all fun and games. During the time [Muammar Gaddafi](#) was in power, Edwards received a call from the [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\)](#). She was a little unsettled by the fact that the agency was aware that she and her husband were hosting five students from Libya, but it turned out the FBI was checking to be sure the students' bank accounts had not been frozen and that they were all fine.

“Over the years, you learn that you don't know what you don't know. We learned so many things – some of them not earth shaking, but interesting nonetheless. Many other cultures are not big on inside pets – dogs, cats, etc. One thing we learned that was fascinating was that just as we have dog or horse shows in America, in Middle Eastern countries there are camel shows! One of our students from Kuwait shared with us that his grandfather had a herd of white camels and they were often prize winners. At a camel show camels are judged by things like the curve of the neck, the flare of their nostrils and even the length of the eyelashes! Who would have known?” laughs Christine.

Asked to summarize her takeaway from nearly two decades of building relationships through caring for international students Christine responds: “I have learned that you simply cannot judge individual people

based on the group they are coming from; there are always points of commonality which serve as a springboard for a closer and better relationship. As one of my Korean students told me, I am a cultural ambassador. On a profound level, I have learned first-hand that all people can be my children; you deal with people as individuals, as divine beings – rather than people from particular cultures. We are all children of the Divine – no matter what the cultural or religious differences; if we dialogue long enough we can reach an understanding of heart.”



Christine Edwards and her husband, Randolph Rimmel live in Portland, Oregon at their International Homestay House with an assortment of students from all over the world.