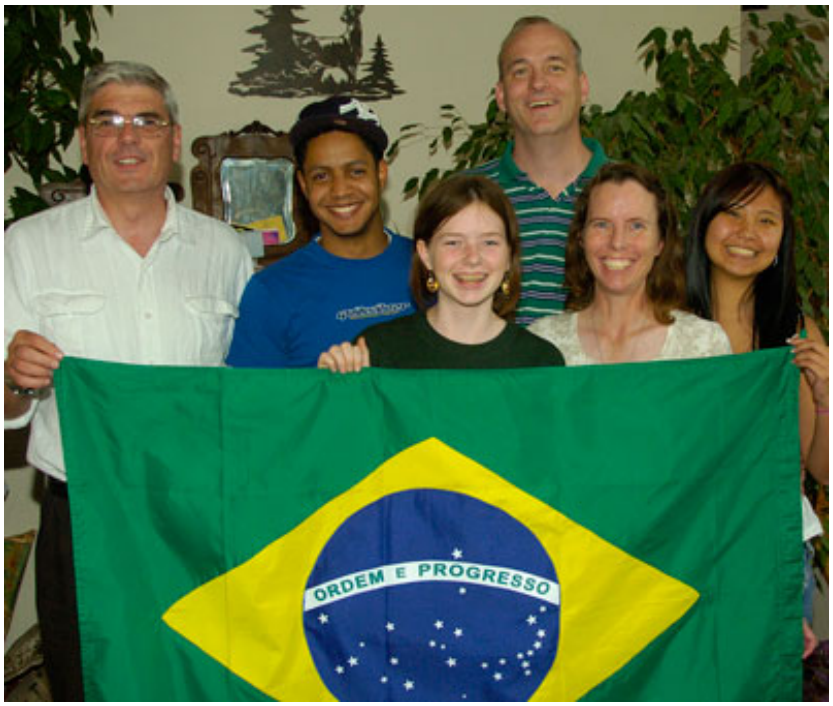

Ten years ago, the Elliott family hosted their first foreign exchange student from Slovakia. “The experience was so good,” said Thom, “we decided to take on more.” Since then, they have hosted another student from Slovakia, and individuals from Italy, Japan and their most recent visitor Vanessa Nishi from Brazil.

The experience of being a host family has been so rewarding, Thom and Julie are taking their involvement to the next level by becoming the STS area representatives. The position was formerly held by Diane Webster, and after working with the Elliotts as host parents, she approached them about taking the role.

The STS Foundation is the program most of the area’s exchange students come through. The program places students from around the world with families in America.

Since March, when they became representatives, the couple has enjoyed speaking with people around the community about hosting exchange students and arranging for their own student from Switzerland. In addition to helping find host families in Holyoke and surrounding areas, as representatives they will work with the students and families throughout the year to make sure things continue to go smoothly.

At this point, there is only one student who has made arrangements to stay in Holyoke for the next school year. In recent years, the school has been fortunate to have several students from abroad, and it is the Elliotts’ hope that this year will be similar.

Having been host parents before, Thom and Julie sincerely recommend it to others. “One of the biggest benefits, especially if you have kids, is a broader view of the world,” noted Thom. Camille, a freshman at HHS, agreed she has learned a lot about Brazil-—and the metric system-—while Nishi lived with them.

Visitors to St. Patrick Catholic Church Maurizzio Bietrolungo of Italy and Cesar Quinones of the Dominican Republic have also become close family friends with the Elliotts this year. The family members all speak very highly of the opportunity to look beyond the United States and learn about other fascinating countries.

From the other perspective, Nishi pointed out studying in Holyoke has been a great experience for her. She hopes many others will have the chance to spend a year here. You

learn so much more as a student than if you come for vacation, said Nishi.

Having spoken to many about hosting a student already, Julie observed several of the same concerns from person to person. People are afraid that hosting will be expensive and difficult, added Thom. It's really not though, they both assured. As Thom put it, you basically go on as usual, and add an extra plate at the dinner table.

Hosts are not expected to provide a United States sightseeing trip or anything of the sort. They just need to provide a safe, caring environment for students. They will be kept busy enough just being in a new country and meeting new people.

In her experience, Julie said the students are very smart, independent and easy to get along with. That, combined with the extensive application process, makes it highly likely that the student and the family will be a good match, with similar interests.

Although Julie and Thom are based in Holyoke, they can help families from any of the surrounding towns who wish to host an exchange student.

Anyone interested in hosting a student for the 2009-10 school year can contact Thom or Julie Elliott at 970-854-5294. Arrangements should be made by Aug. 1 to give families and students time to prepare for the school year.