

Epworth Hospitality

Every Tuesday summer evening, Epworth United Methodist Church in Rehoboth Beach, DE hosts international youth who are hired on J1 Visas to assist local businesses during the summer rush. Young people, 18-22 years old, typically travel halfway around the world to work here in our restaurants, hotels, and retail shops. On Tuesday nights during June, July, and August, they pedal bicycles through summertime traffic, heat, and often rain to Epworth for a free meal and fellowship.

Since our worship theme for this year is “Hospitality,” we’d like to share how the J1 dinners have brought us joy since they began at our original church site in downtown Rehoboth, and how they continue to increase our faith in God and in the goodness of humanity. Something that happened at last night’s dinner is worth sharing. It’s now August 20, 2025, and only one J1 dinner remains this season. Our summer visitors have grown to know each other and us as well. Last night my husband Perry, who is a greeter, noticed one table where a Turkish man named Mustafah was laughing and talking, mostly in English, with three young women. Perry knew that one woman was from Belarus, one was from Russia, and one was from the Ukraine. The four had chosen to sit together and swap stories. Their friendship and congeniality provided a stark contrast to today’s rigid meeting at the White House where international leaders failed to make much progress toward stopping wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Over the years, we have learned much from these young women and men. Many of them come from oppressive homelands, but they invariably exude optimism, energy, openness, respect and sincerity. More than a few have told us that in the USA “they feel they can breathe again.” As August winds down and their departure date approaches, they *never* complain, but we can see anxiety in many of their faces. One year before Russia again invaded Ukraine, Perry was putting chairs away when a Russian girl approached him and said she had received an offer of marriage from an American. She asked if Perry thought she should accept. GULP. Perry responded that “He didn’t know her or the person who had proposed, and there was always uncertainty with lifetime commitments.” Then he said there was one thing he was certain of.” “What’s that?” she asked. “I’m certain you don’t have any future in Russia,” Perry said. On the car ride home that night, I heard about this exchange and could see Perry was second guessing his response and wondering if he had been too direct. Three and a half years later, we don’t know the Russian woman’s decision. We pray she is happy and healthy wherever she is.

Each J1 ministry year has had different challenges. During the early years, we fed over 100 youth each night. Then Covid hit and we had to cancel one summer entirely. Numbers fell some when Russia invaded Ukraine but rebounded this summer when we averaged 80-100 J1 workers nightly in June and July. Attendance typically drops in August when workers may take on two or even three jobs to earn as much as possible before leaving. Some wish to travel to D.C. or other U.S. sites, and they take a week or a few days to do this prior to departure.

This year a large portion of our workers are from the country of Kazakhstan. Perry consulted YouTube to learn that Kazakhstan is a LARGE land locked country in central Asia where the most common protein is horsemeat. It is east of Ukraine and has a long border with Russia to its north and China to its east. Kazakhstan is the 9th largest country in the world! Who knew? Each year we are amazed that youth from the other side of the globe speak exceptionally fluent English, and often 3 to 4 other languages as well. Kazakhstan received thousands of Russians fleeing their country to avoid the draft for the invasion of Ukraine, and Kazakhstan maintains diplomatic relations with China, the European Union, the United States, western and Arabic countries----and even Russia. Kazakhstan's energy resources and substantial land mass make it a key bridge between east and west. Our hospitality may have far reaching effects.

As a greeter, Perry has more time to talk with our visitors than most J1 volunteers, and he routinely tries to mention a city or features the area is known for. Perry says "eyes light up" if he can mention a specific landmark. My J1 duties have allowed me to interact with our dinner guests at the trash table (during earlier years) and now as a server in the food line. Other members volunteer at the drink table, at the dessert station, with set-up and take down, to push the roving ice cream or soup cart, or cook as a member of the kitchen crew. Three special people are essential for Tuesday nights to happen. We all report to Archangel Dotti Outland who manages food prep and everything else. Lieutenant Diane Mead sets up and manages the giveaway table of tote bags, tees, toiletries, and snacks. And Saint Judy Moore runs our temperamental dishwasher. They are our hospitable heavenly bodies. Additionally, over the years, hundreds of Epworth and Seaside members have rendered hospitality to our foreign travelers.

Remember Mustafah, the Turkish young man talking with the 3 young ladies last night? After dinner, I watched as Mustafah and Perry hugged and exchanged a preliminary "farewell". They are unlikely to see each other again. Perry's father was orphaned at 3 years when Turks killed his father and mother (Perry's grandparents). The countries of Turkey and Greece have been enemies for centuries. When Perry was born, his father always stressed that "there are good Greeks and bad Greeks; there are good Turks and bad Turks. Never hate." Mustafah knew Perry was a Greek American and yet he befriended him. His behavior was mature beyond his years and the embodiment of Biblical hospitality.

Carol Psaros, J1 volunteer

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