

Outlook

SAN MARINO

Generosity and Gratitude at the USC President's House

By Eric Noland

Rajendra Thakurathi has learned a little about the American tradition of Thanksgiving since arriving from Nepal a few years ago. "It seems that Thanksgiving is something that is all about family, and it should be more private time," he said.

So imagine his surprise when he received an invitation to join 340 other foreign and out-of-state USC students as guests of university President C. L. Max Nikias and his wife, Niki, for a lavish Thanksgiving dinner at their home in San Marino.

As he entered the elegant setting on the back lawn last Thursday, Thakurathi said, "It's a different perspective of American society and American family values, because I'm a film major, and in mainstream media and in films, we don't see this very much. . . . He was generous enough to invite us to be part of his family."

It's a tradition that began the day after the Nikiases moved into the USC President's House in 2010. They remembered being graduate students in Buffalo, N.Y., far from their home country of Cyprus. Thanksgiving was a perplexing American custom.

"It was very lonely," Nikias said, "because we didn't have anywhere to go." Niki added: "We assumed the restaurants



would be open. It was a surprise that they were closed."

She conceived the idea of ensuring that similar students at USC wouldn't be subjected to the same fate. They've hosted the dinner each of the last five Thanksgivings, welcoming the broader university family to theirs (daughters Georgiana and Maria were part of the festivities Thursday).

The Nikiases greeted every student at the front door. Max later made a few remarks to the assembled students about the history of Thanksgiving. And the dinner was a lesson in itself — all the delights of the traditional holiday feast, dished up buffet-style on the patio.

Amy Dai, unable to get home to Cumming, Ga., said she didn't want

to think about what her alternative would have been on this particular afternoon.

"I would be the only one in the hallways, walking alone," she said. "I'd be going to the dining hall by myself, which was pretty empty when I went today. It makes me thankful for everything he's offered here."



(top) USC student Amy Dai is greeted at the front door by USC President C. L. Max Nikias; Viting Sun and Matthew Davis enjoy choices at the buffet.

OUTLOOK photos

A Trojan Thanksgiving

On Thanksgiving Day, President and Mrs. Nikias welcomed more than 350 USC students to their home.



1. President and Mrs. Nikias greeted each student at the door.
2. Students enjoyed a traditional Thanksgiving dinner.
3. John Mork, chairman of the USC Board of Trustees, attended with his wife Julie.
4. Mrs. Nikias (right) appears with her daughters, Maria (left) and Georgiana (second from right), as well as a student.
5. Students show their Trojan spirit.
6. President Nikias described the importance of Thanksgiving in American culture.
7. President and Mrs. Nikias began this tradition shortly after his inauguration in 2010.
8. Students came from everywhere—Beijing, Mumbai, and even Glendale.



Photos by Steve Cohn