



global warmth

UCLA Reaches Out to International Students & Scholars

By Nancy Sokoler Steiner

marcelo Mitnik had never set foot in the United States when he arrived from Argentina to attend UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television. To pursue his dream, Mitnik had quit his job, sold his possessions and bid farewell to his family and friends.

"In spite of the excitement, I was devastated," recalls Mitnik. "I left my entire life behind."

Within hours of landing at Los Angeles International Airport, Mitnik arrived at UCLA's Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars. There, a counselor assisted him with visa issues, invited him to a welcome dinner, introduced him to other Center staff and added him to a listserv to receive information about upcoming events.

"I knew no one. I knew nothing," Mitnik says about his arrival in 1999. "They gave me a sense of belonging."

He was so impressed with The

Dashew Center that he took a part-time job there. He's been there ever since and now serves as the Center's Manager of Programs.

Since 1957, The Dashew Center (formerly the Office of International Students and Scholars) has been helping students and faculty from around the globe to thrive at UCLA. Like Mitnik, these adventurous souls face a confusing array of challenges such as finding a place to live, opening a bank account and getting a driver's license – all in a foreign country using a language that may not be their native tongue.

"We're a one-stop shop," says Mitnik. "Whether they have financial issues, a landlord problem or their laptop has been stolen, international students can come here for help, resources and referrals."

Last year, UCLA was home to 2,242 foreign graduate students and 1,226 foreign undergraduates who hailed from 115 countries. Reflecting the

Center's embrace of diversity, staff at The Dashew Center includes individuals from more than ten different countries.

"We're committed to UCLA being an international campus and a global partner," says Debra Geller, Acting Director. "We're here to encourage a diverse community, to accept the contributions from the best all around the world and to help build future leaders for the world."

This fall, hundreds of international students participated in the Dashew International Center's Orientation Program. Students attending DICOP learned about living in Los Angeles, took a guided tour of campus, and participated in a variety of social events.

All students attending UCLA on a non-immigration visa check in with The Dashew Center at the beginning of their first quarter and attend a workshop on regulatory issues. They are also invited to participate in the Dashew International Center Orientation Program (DICOP), a 3-day session which takes place shortly before the academic year begins. The orientation provides workshops on housing, health insurance, computer resources and other practical matters with which international students must contend.

For David Chen, orientation provided a way to acclimate after leaving Japan to

attend UCLA's School of Law. "I expected a tough transition here," says Chen. Instead, DICOP smoothed the way from the moment he arrived. A volunteer picked him up at the airport and drove him to his hotel. Another brought him to campus, helped him to register, introduced him to The Dashew Center staff and gave him a tour of the school. Other

volunteers took him on Ikea runs, to open a bank account and to get a cell phone.

"I never imagined I'd meet people from all over the world," says Chen. "It was nice to know there were a lot of international students going through the same thing."

The Dashew Center also offers an eight-week English Conversation Program to help non-native speakers improve their English skills.

In addition, the Center cooperates with other campus departments and organizations to create programs – such as dances, festivals and a welcome picnic – which give domestic and inter-



national students a chance to mingle. International Cooking Nights and Film Festivals also bring diverse members of the UCLA community together to celebrate different cultures.

Orientation participants report a high degree of satisfaction with the program. In a survey of last year's participants, the percentage expressing that they felt "somewhat" to "absolutely" integrated into the University community and Los Angeles jumped from 35 percent before they took the program to 78 percent afterward.

When law student David Chen came to UCLA, he said that he expected to

endure his three years in Los Angeles and then return to Japan. Now, he's not so sure. "I wouldn't mind staying here a few years... It's a wonderful place."

That's just the reaction that Dashew Center staff members strive for. "I love the Center and the diversity and international understanding it stands for," says Mitnik. "If more people had this kind of opportunity, things would be different in the world." **IF**

For more information, contact the Dashew Center for International Students & Scholars at (310) 825-1681 or www.internationalcenter.ucla.edu.