Pretend for a moment that you are an international student at the University of Oklahoma. Your name is Mei-ling. You are attending OU on an exchange program from an Asian country, housed in a dorm room thousands of miles away from home and family. And sometimes you wonder: “How do you make friends in America? I’ve gotten to know a lot of people in the international community, but I want to learn more about this country. How can I get to know American students outside of the classroom?”

Or, pretend you are an OU student from a small Oklahoma town. Your name is Sherry. You are in your first year at OU, live in the dorms, away from home for the first time in your life. And sometimes you wonder: “How do I find the ‘diversity’ that’s supposed to be here? I’ve made some friends on campus, but they’re all pretty much like me. How can I get to know people from other places and learn more about other cultures?”

The puzzle posed by Mei-ling and Sherry is one and the same: How do you tear down walls?

OU Cousins was formed to help do just that. The program, a brainchild of David and Molly Boren, tries to bring OU’s international students together with American students for fun and friendship. Students in the program are assigned one or more “cousins” who form alliances, learn about each other’s cultural backgrounds and gain a great deal more enjoyment from their college experience.

President Boren says the program allows OU to “take full advantage of the opportunity that comes from having over 1,700 international students on our campus.

“The Cousins program gives a great opportunity to both American and international students to broaden their educational experiences by getting to know one another better,” Boren says.

According to Nanette Shadid, an OU graduate student who coordinates the OU Cousins program, “Studies

Sooner students are taking OU’s international visitors into the family by building friendships one-to-one.

THE COUSINS

by Michael Waters
photos by Robert Taylor

Kristen Eckstein, right, introduces her OU Cousin from Singapore, Rachel Tan, to some native Oklahomans who inhabit the Whinery Ranch near Norman.
have shown that international students actually do better on campus if they're well integrated with American students. And it benefits American students as much as it does internationals."

Some 700 American and international students are involved in the program, which has just completed its second year. Two of that number, freshman letters major Michael Heaton and French exchange student Julian Liurette, illustrate how OU Cousins bring diverse people together who otherwise might never have had the opportunity to meet and enjoy each other's company.

"I've really enjoyed getting to know Julian," Heaton says, "and I don't think I would have gotten to know him otherwise. I get different things out of my friendship with him than I do out of my American friends."

"I meet Americans in class," Liurette says, "and talk to them a bit, but we never go out together or do things. We're just in class."

In addition to participating in special events organized for the Cousins program each semester, Heaton says, "We've done little things like go to a movie, meet for lunch, go for coffee. We've gone up to Guthrie and to the Philharmonic."

Then, Heaton starts to say, "I've really enjoyed the Cousins program—"

"It's over now? You don't enjoy it any more?" Liurette quips.

"No, no! I still enjoy it," Heaton laughs—in a relaxed, bantering spirit that seems to epitomize at least one kind of successful match.

Shadid says the idea for pairing students such as Heaton and Liurette grew out of a roundtable discussion that the Borens held with a group of students in the spring of 1995. Shadid recalls that Molly Boren asked one international student how well he had gotten to interact with American students, "and he said, 'That was the one thing I didn't get to do.'"

Seeing a need to give international students a chance to do just that, the Borens put together a committee to devise a viable program, says Shadid.

The program was initiated in 1995-96, first advised by Millie Audas, director of the Office of International Relations, and later by Anona Adair, the retired vice-president for student affairs who worked with Boren for a year as assistant for special projects. Shadid, the program coordinator for 1996-97, insists that she has a strong contingent of helpers.

"There's a wonderful committee of people representing housing, student development, international relations, the National Merit program and student support services," she says, along with the UOSA president and the international advisory council president, comprising 11 people in all.

The committee organizes at least three activities per semester for the benefit of the Cousins, Shadid explains. Events this past year have included an introductory ice cream social and an OU Theatre presentation of Andrew Lloyd Webber's Aspects of Love, hosted by the Borens, preceded by a reception at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

Shadid adds, "We also try to couple at least one event per semester with something that's happening on campus," such as the annual OU holiday tree light-
At the Whinery Ranch western party, three OU student leaders—all Crimson Club members and National Merit Scholars—show their lighter side by serenading the OU Cousins with Garth Brooks' “Friends in Low Places.” From left are Tom Karnowski, El Cajon, California; Viet Huynh, Oklahoma City; and Noah Schmitz, Martinez, California, who is also resident adviser for the international floor in Couch Center.

Kristen Eckstein, a sophomore education major from Oklahoma City, says she was “surprised at how much the people putting together this program do to keep it going. There’s an activity or event nearly every month. They do a lot to keep us aware of the events that are going on, and they do a lot to match you with the right person.”

Eckstein’s cousin, Rachel Tan, a Singapore junior majoring in psychology who has been matched with three different cousins, says the fruits of that hard work are an invaluable service to students from abroad. “Some international students just come here, cram in all the hours and get a degree. And they don’t have many memories of their stay in the U.S.

“And that’s really sad,” she adds, “because part of getting an education here is meeting the people.”

Shadid expressed optimism that there would be plenty of opportunity for just that in the Cousins’ final planned activity of the spring semester, “a Western party complete with a country band, line dancing and barbecue.”

“She’s gonna learn how to two-step,” Eckstein says, pointing to her cousin Tan as the two of them laugh together.

Beyond taking part in the organized events, however, cousins insist that students’ enjoyment of the program depends to a significant degree on their own initiative.

Eckstein says, “I had a cousin in the past, and things were kind of stifled. When you meet somebody for the first time, you feel like you’re coming from completely different corners of the world. That’s not ever going to be lessened, but it’s easier if you just go with the right attitude.”

“You have to put work into it,” Heaton says. “In my experience, friendships take about two years to grow, so when you only have someone here for six months or a year, it’s a little more difficult to get to know him. You have to make an extra effort, more so than in a normal friendship.”

Michael Morrow, a junior zoology major from Oklahoma City, points out, “The program is as big or as little as you want it to be.” He adds that while “some people just come to the events,” Morrow and his cousin, Lebanese senior Youssef Ferzli, “try and do as much as we can together outside of the program.

“We go to church together sometimes, since we have the same religion,” Morrow says, adding that they also get a third cousin involved in their activities. Ferzli stayed with
Morrow for four days over Thanksgiving and ate some “great Lebanese cooking” for the first time in “a long, long time,” courtesy of Morrow’s grandmother.

Ferzli, who first met Morrow two years ago, describes the Cousins as “a very valuable program for international students—it gives people a positive attitude about talking to one another.”

International students in the program represent a significant portion of the globe, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, France, Spain, Japan, the Philippines, Mexico, Germany, Denmark, Taiwan, Romania, Nigeria, Great Britain, Turkey, India, Singapore, Vietnam, Austria, People’s Republic of China, Bangladesh and Bosnia.

Although the program has drawn only about 15 to 20 percent of OU’s international student population, Shadid points out that “a lot of our international students are degree-seeking students who are here on master’s and Ph.D. programs. There’s a larger percentage of exchange students in the program than of degree-seeking international students.”

Actually, Shadid says, American females are the largest single group of people involved in OU Cousins, numbering more than the entire count of international females on campus. “So it ends up that we have three American females for every international female.” The males, she says, are evenly matched, with about 120 Americans and 120 internationals taking part.

The biggest challenge the organizers face each year, according to Shadid, is creating successful matches among these large numbers. However, they have been able to apply some crucial lessons learned since the program’s founding.

“We’ve learned that the matches work out best if the cousins meet face to face,” she says. “The first year we sent out letters saying, ‘This is your cousin, this is his phone number.’ This year we decided to have them all meet at a planned event, all at the same time. If you meet somebody face-to-face, there’s more of a chance you’ll call him.”

Chuckling, Shadid says the biggest complaint she hears from cousins is that “men don’t like the fact that they can’t be matched with women, and vice versa.” The organizers limit the matches to same-gender pairings because of variances in dating mores. They try to match students for common languages, interests and academic specialties.

Those factors can be critical to ensuring a good match.

A handshake breaches language and cultural barriers for Anthony Lee, left, of Yukon, and his new cousin from Norway, Fred Lomme. The two met at an OU Cousins tailgate party before a home football game in September 1995.

In the true spirit of internationalism, Martina Dreyer, from Germany, and Julian Liurette, from France, demonstrate a Scottish dance at the OU Cousins western party at the Whinery Ranch in April 1997.
Tan says, "A friend of mine from Nigeria really hit it off with her cousin—they went to a Christian concert together. I think when you share just one other common element, it really helps."

On the other hand, while decidedly not a matchmaking service, the program has been responsible indirectly for a couple of romantic linkages, according to Millie Audas, director of international programs.

Gustav Bengsston, a student from Stockholm, Sweden, began dating Eva Vasquez, a student from Santiago, Spain, after meeting at an OU Cousins activity. The couple has moved to Sweden together, Audas says. "And we know of another couple who got married after meeting through the program."

In fact, cousins such as Heaton say that the one-on-one pairings are only part of the benefit of participating—that OU Cousins opens doors to a wide variety of new friendships and broadened horizons.

"Through the program and the activities I've also met several students from Scotland," says Heaton. "I've gotten involved in some of the clubs that Julian's involved in, and I've met a bunch of international students that way."

"A lot of the American cousins and the international cousins who go to the events are close friends to one another," Ferzli says, adding that the program can create circles of friends instead of isolated pairs—that cousins sometimes become close to roommates of cousins, and friends of roommates, and so on.

In addition, Shadid points out that the value international students find in having American friends goes beyond fun and learning. While it might create a warm memory for an international cousin to learn from her American counterpart—say, how to make chocolate-chip cookies—U.S. students sometimes help their cousins from abroad in more critical ways.

"There was an international student some time ago who was hit by a car, a hit-and-run. And it actually happened right outside the sorority house of her OU cousin," Shadid says. "The international student had no idea of what the procedures were for getting help, but her cousin was there to tell her what to do and where to call for help."

Similarly, Shadid adds, international students encounter opportunities to offer assistance to their newfound American friends. "One of our American cousins went to Santiago, Spain, and her cousin here at OU, who was from Santiago, made several phone calls to make sure that her friends there were helping out her cousin.

"And there are many, many instances of American students who've gone to visit their cousins in their home countries."

Morrow, for one, is looking forward to a chance to visit his cousin Ferzli on his home turf. "I'm ready to go see Lebanon—visit his house and stay with him for awhile," Morrow says with a grin.

Moreover, according to Audas, "The American students participating in the program are becoming more interested in international activities and study abroad. We've seen a number of the American cousins coming to our office and beginning the process of application for programs in some of the 79 universities we have agreements with all over the world."

Heaton, for one, may well have had his future direction affected by participating in the program. He says that "Julian's really sold me on the University of Lille." And Liurette, who lived in Paris for 18 years, has offered to give Heaton a tour of the French capital—as Heaton boisterously reminds him.

The vision of a pair of pals sightseeing together long after their OU days are over is perhaps representative of a
In this souvenir snapshot for their scrapbooks, OU Cousins gather around Leo (in hat) and Doris Whinery, who have hosted the international group at a western party for the past two years.

program that seems to produce such images in abundance.
An African and an American roller-blazing together down a sidewalk in a blazing spring sun. Eyes from Europe and the U.S. exchanging friendly glances amid the casual chatter of a weekday lunch. A pair of notebooks dotted with personal scrawls, English in one and Mandarin in the other, side by side on a study table. E-mail messages going first around campus, and in years to come around the world, offering greetings, marking anniversaries, exchanging news, giving condolences.

For Tan, one image of the warmth generated by the program was the OU Cousins invitation to the *Aspects of Love* performance, for which Boren picked up the tab. “The generosity of President Boren touched me a great deal,” she recalls. “I think I’ll always remember that at a time when we were far away from our parents and our home, that he could be so generous.”

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I predict,” he says, “that this program will be viewed in the future as making a major contribution to the University by greatly enhancing the educational experience which all our students receive by having more interchange between American and international students.”

In the end, what OU Cousins appears to have done is to chisel into finer shape a spirit of good will long present on the campus. Audas, a former international student herself, says the University has been known in the past for offering a uniquely friendly environment for international students, but that “it was not until we established this program that we formalized the activities that made these friendships possible.”

Those friendships made at OU now could well have a long-term benefit—more American students with an enhanced knowledge of those who live abroad, more international students who have a deeper regard for Americans on a person-to-person basis, and the cumulative wisdom gained from those experiences passed on to their families to come.

And perhaps in time, with enough participation in enough programs such as OU Cousins, the Mei-lings and Sherrys of years ahead might find thinner, less imposing walls between them—walls that will crumble at the merest touch.