UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

December 14, 2018
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From the Heart

If you really want to make a friend, go to someone's house and eat with him; the people who give you their food give you their heart. So said none other than César Chávez.

The sentiment is alive and well and in regular practice at UC Santa Barbara, where a new effort from the Office of International Students & Scholars (OISS) aims to foster connections over food. Launched in November, the Big Table Initiative pairs students with volunteers from within the campus community who host a meal at their home.

"Sharing a meal is a tried and true way for folks to get to know each other," said Chryss Yost, academic programs coordinator for OISS, who oversees the year-round initiative. "It can be hard to connect in the rush of daily life at the university. We wanted to encourage people to slow down, to really get to know each other, and sharing a meal is a delicious way to do that. The ways we prepare and consume our food are deeply connected to our individual cultures and traditions."

Tamara Berton heard about the new program shortly before Thanksgiving, and immediately signed up as a host for the holiday. Inspired by gratitude — her daughter has been similarly hosted by families near the out-of-state university she attends — she wanted to "pay that forward." But the experience held other benefits, too.

"Like many families, we have experienced loss of loved ones in recent years. I think that hosting a student shifted some of the focus away from the 'empty chairs' at the

table,” said Berton, a senior compensation analyst in human resources. “We also got to learn a little something about the experiences and traditions of someone from another country. It was interesting to note how traditions may vary, but there is something really special about coming together for a meal that all cultures seem to share.”

And it’s not a holiday-only endeavor. The Big Table Initiative is meant to be a year-round, any day, any time program, according to Yost, who matches guests and hosts who register online. It’s another way for the university to foster early connections for students who are far from home and to nourish a sense of community.

“It’s really connected to a beautiful, generous spirit here on campus. Feeling welcome and connected is a human need,” Yost said. “We want people to experience ‘everyday life’ in an American home. Special occasions are wonderful, too, of course. But really, it’s about sharing what makes your home ‘home’ — including the tastes and fragrances of cooking. It doesn’t need to be fancy.

“It is a lot of fun to talk to people about life at UCSB and to learn about someone else’s home life,” she continued. “Connecting with people one-on-one builds empathy and understanding. Participants are literally inviting diversity to the table, and that can be eye-opening.”

Take it from Devendra Jangid. A native of India who came to UC Santa Barbara to pursue a graduate degree in electrical and computer engineering, he spent Thanksgiving with Berton’s family.

“I really liked the idea of the Big Table Initiative because it gives the opportunity to international students to meet local people,” Jangid said. “It was a great experience for me to spend time with Tamara’s family. I met many fantastic people there and we shared many experiences of our lives. And I loved the food.”

“For me, it really just emphasized the importance of the human connection,” Berton added of hosting Jangid. “We are all so busy, especially around the holidays. But when you sit around the table and share a meal, it feels like life slows down for a few moments. Getting to know someone new, sharing a laugh, or even discussing differing viewpoints reminds us that there is more to life than the daily grind.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.