



Ellen Boston from Living City October 2010

Hospitality reigns

An exchange student's discovery

By Ellen Van Stichel

I arrived in America to study in Boston for a semester. I would have been completely lost if friends of friends had not picked me up at the airport. That is when I first met Mary. When she accompanied me to the place where I had reserved a room, it appeared not to fulfill the requirements. Mary advised me to have a good rest and promised to drop by the next day to see what could be done. "Don't worry," she said, "you have a big family here."

When Mary came over the next day, I was waiting for her with my luggage already packed and ready to leave. She very kindly offered me the use of her apartment while searching for a suitable accommodation. She showed me around the city, introduced me to the American way of life, took me to my appointments at the university and introduced me to her friends.

That is how I met the James family. Later that evening, though we had dropped by briefly, Mary received a phone call from her friends. They had talked to their two girls and if I approved, I was welcome to stay with them for my whole stay in Boston — it seemed a true gift from God.

Though their house was not small, it still didn't seem large enough to welcome a stranger in for three months. I was not their first guest though! An artist had stayed there before me and even a whole family had once lived with them. It soon appeared to me that for the James family this was a concrete way to live, founded on the spirituality of unity they believed in. In a very special and concrete way they embodied their faith through small and big decisions, of which their hospitality towards me was but one.

From the first moment, I felt welcome in a real home! I was considered and treated as part of the family, including the cooking, hanging out with the children and joining them on family trips on the weekend. I saw this saying on the wall, "Be the first to love." They showed hospitality and openness to my boyfriend whenever he came to visit, to my friends at the university who would drop by occasionally and to the professors I would invite for brunch.

The James family also arranged for me to visit Mariapolis Luminosa in Hyde Park, NY, where I saw another facet of the life of the spirituality. I met a lot of good people, but more importantly the experience touched my heart.

As a theology student I was professionally occupied with faith, though always connected personally to the Church. My time in Boston deepened my faith in unexpected and unforeseen ways. The way these people considered their job as part of their calling

inspired my work; their spontaneous reflections on faith made me think. Commenting on a newspaper article over breakfast, one of them said, “If you are religious, God is the foundation of your existence and you need to take that seriously.” This stayed with me a long time.

It was very clear that I indeed had a big family that went even beyond the United States and that I found on my return to my country.

(from Nieuwe Stad, Belgium)