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Rolling out the Welcome Mat

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Friday November 4, 2016

Karen and I have enjoyed opening up the president's residence for meals and receptions with students, faculty, staff, trustees and alumni. Last week, we had so much fun at a pizza dinner with student tour guides. This story appears in the Nov. 4, 2016, issue of Campus Report.

Wearing a handmade Flyers vest over his tiny five-pound Yorkie frame, Theo sat patiently in Karen Spina's arms as her husband asked the icebreaker question, knowing full well the spontaneous answer he'd get from a roomful of University of Dayton students.

"Who says Theo should keep the shirt on? Who says the shirt off?" asked UD President Eric Spina, setting the mood for an informal evening of laughter and conversation over pizza and salad with more than 50 student tour guides from the admission office.

Spina followed up with a show of hands for which team students favored in the World Series, prompting divided support for the Indians and Cubs. "Who wants the Pirates?" he joked, raising his hand.

Welcome to an evening at the president's residence, a stately 80-year-old English eclectic stone house the trustees purchased during last year's presidential search. Less than two miles from campus on a quiet, tree-lined street in Oakwood, the house has already taken on the personality of its first residents — warm, welcoming, unpretentious.

"It's very cool," said Renee Brown, a senior special education major from Lexington, Kentucky, about having dinner at the president's house. "It's great to see the president around campus and here. It shows he's really in touch with the campus community."

Over the past several months, the Spinass have entertained a dozen groups in their home — from the president's emissaries fresh off a Sunday afternoon kayaking trip on the Great Miami River to the Alumni Leadership Council after a day of conversation and imagination about their alma mater's future to the staff that helped to prepare the house for the University's use. The student a cappella group "Remedy" received a rousing ovation from trustees at a dinner during their fall board meeting, and both students and faculty members have shared their musical talents for the enjoyment of guests during events.

The walls of a large, high-ceiling multipurpose room that seats 90 for meals are lined with faculty and student artwork. An adjoining conference room serves as an off-campus site for meetings, such as the executive committee of the academic senate. Plans are in the works to decorate the home with crèches from the University's world-renowned collection for a gathering with the Marianists during the Christmas holidays.

The Spinass say they want to use the house to "celebrate students, faculty, staff and alumni" — from dinners with student leaders and accreditation teams to receptions for faculty who achieved special recognitions and major donors who funded academic initiatives.

"My wife Karen and I want to incorporate all the talents of our University community into the space and its functions to make it a warm and supportive environment — a house that reflects the University's welcoming, hospitable character and showcases both our Flyer spirit and the tremendous talent we have among our students," Spina said.

On this evening, the student tour guides participated in a strategic visioning exercise and peppered the new president with questions. They learned he's "still a little hurt" after losing to Ken Bone — a virtual unknown until the presidential debates — in a Red Scare Twitter poll, though he did win as a "wild card," ensuring that a gigantic poster of his face will be waved in the student section at Flyer games. A passionate college basketball fan, Spina promised he will find a fun way to celebrate with students, but not crowd surf, if the Flyers make an NCAA tourney run again. And on the question of what ice cream flavor best describes his personality, he quickly offered, "My immediate response is vanilla. Peanut butter if I'm feeling sweet."

As the students headed out the door to vans taking them back to campus, Spina said, "That was energizing. I get so much joy and energy from our students."

One aspect of the evening surprised him: "I wasn't prepared for all the selfies. One student asked how it felt being like a Disney character!"