International House, or I-House, opened on the IUPUI campus in 1991. Occupying the second floor of a dormitory at the western edge of campus, it served international and domestic students. Demand to live there regularly exceeds availability, and a selection process assures worldwide distribution of students with U.S. students forming a quarter to a third of the group.

The original building had common areas, and students formed the International Club to develop activities in those spaces. International Culture hours every Friday afternoon were among the first initiatives. In 2001, I-House moved off campus while its dormitory was razed and rebuilt. Students returned in 2004 to suites of four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. Though prompted by I-House, the International Club from the beginning was open to all interested IUPUI students. The club gradually took on a life of its own. The culture hours moved to the Campus Center and have continually attracted 50-70 students a week for a quarter century.

Jill Jean-Baptiste has been program coordinator of I-House since 1996. She notes that I-House has never had to recruit to fill rooms. “As we complete our first 25 years, we are hoping to expand, perhaps double our numbers. We are also looking into ways to re-create larger meeting rooms like ones I-House had in the original building.” The International Club and I-House keep close ties, but Jean-Baptiste sees opportunities for I-House to develop new kinds of programming. “We’ve only just started talking about it, but I’d like to see activities with more faculty involvement, more opportunities to talk about issues, perhaps even the development of a certificate in global awareness.”

Old building or new, I-House retains its familial atmosphere. Open doors, informal get-togethers—especially at mealtime. At Thanksgiving, students pull tables into the hallway for a communal dinner. “We have students of all ages,” Jean-Baptiste said, “new undergraduates and older Fulbright scholars. Like a family, the young students keep the older students active and having fun; the older students encourage the younger ones to keep serious and get their work done. The connections made at I-House are the most important thing. I can see it on Facebook and hear about it otherwise that students who met at I-House 25 years ago are still friends and still keep in touch.”
I-House Reminiscences

Before college, I didn’t have connections to other cultures, lived in a mostly white farming community. I wanted to break out and see the world, and I wanted to live on campus, so I got into I-House.

Pat Biddinger of the international office and then Executive Vice Chancellor William Plater made the original proposal that developed into I-House, which was the first floor of what was then University Apartments. Pat would have each individual’s name posted with a flag on the doors. If you wanted to meet someone from a particular country, you could see what countries were out there.

At I-House, we had our own kitchens. We would cook for each other. When you have those meals and have that intimacy, you talk.

One year I-House gave out awards. Coolest room. Messiest room. Jim got the award for the most entrepreneurial room. “I had put in a vending machine. I never made money because we’d always unlock it because we didn’t have change around.”

Most felt very secure, very safe; most of the time we would leave our doors open. We didn’t have to lock. Just walked in. After class, when everyone returned to their rooms, that was my social time.

I had more international friends than American friends. Yeah, I did too.

In the early days, there was a one-year time limit for living in I-House. Many of us moved upstairs second year; some moved on to other places, but most stayed close to I-House.

There are a lot of reasons why I-House changed my life. I got to know other cultures that I really never knew about. It opened my mind to other cultures and not to think my way is the only way.

We lost the ability to see color or language. We became a true community in that there was no difference. We taught each other how to live. And now because of what we learned at I-House, we continually teach other people how to not see color, not to have the divided culture. We teach our children and other people’s children. There is no reason to see differences.

If I hadn’t been around such a diverse community, I don’t think I would be as good at my job now.

Most all of us are still connected. We stay in touch with Facebook. We may not see each other for years, but we are still close.