In 1953, there were 207 international students on the Bloomington campus. The International Center, a house on Third Street where Forest Quad is now, provided them a place to meet for conversation and occasional meals. A group of Bloomington residents thought that the community could do more. Local families were matched with individual students. Hosts organized activities in local parks, took students around the region, invited them for meals during holidays and generally helped students negotiate the tasks of daily living in the United States. The Bloomington families gave international students a window into U.S. family life.

These efforts were soon organized into a local chapter of the National U.N. Citizens Committee. The number of host families and the number of students hosted grew every year. In 1970, the Bloomington chapter parted from the national organization and formed its own independent nonprofit, which eventually came to be called Bloomington Worldwide Friendship (BWF).

Despite name and organizational changes, the mission of the group remained the same, and the activities increased. BWF members met new students at planes and buses and helped with settling in. They developed the Hoosier Guide, a reference to community resources that other students and indeed members of the community found useful. By 1970, the activities of the organization were getting national attention; they included:

- Meeting and greeting
- Emergency housing
- The Hoosier Guide, given to all new international students
- Operation Turkey (Thanksgiving hospitality)
- Furniture, blanket and household loan program
The prime mover for much of this effort was Cyny Robinson, who enlisted her next-door neighbor, Kate Kroll, to join the group in 1968. Kroll relates, “The first student matched to me was Joe Jagger, Mick Jagger’s dad, who was working on his master’s degree in physical education. We were the most popular house in the neighborhood. Little kids would come and look through the window.”

Forty-seven years later, Kroll continues to host students. “Students keep with you a long time. One student was matched to me when she was a freshman. She graduated four years later and now has a job as a consultant in Indianapolis. She still comes down at the weekend to stay with me.”

Cindy York currently heads the organization. She confirms that students and their host families can get very close. “One girl had been in a boarding school since the age of three; she saw her parents only on holidays. She loved her time with me and figured out what she had missed all those years. She relied on me for things that she would normally ask parents. Another student totaled a car here. She didn’t know if she was being taken in by the body shop. Her dad told her, ‘You are a long way from home. I could tell you what to do if you were here. But I don’t know what to tell you there.’ I helped her and her father was grateful.

“We helped plan one student’s wedding. Wives have had babies here, and we’ve helped with childcare. The babies, some named after their hosts, became like grandchildren.”

When the students graduate and return home, the bonds don’t break. For many host families, visiting “their students” has been an important objective when they travel abroad.

Current organized activities include a fall picnic at Lake Lemon, an evening of square dancing, tailgate parties at IU football games, and trips to IU baseball and women’s basketball games. “By and large, we want the families to concentrate on activities where they can interact. Each family does something different. They carve pumpkins, have Easter egg hunts. One of the things they are most fascinated with is Halloween. They have lots of questions. When does it happen? Do I need a costume?”

As time goes on, BWF’s constituency has changed. “Students’ English is better,” York said. “Due to technology, the younger kids are not so homesick anymore. They Skype with their parents every day. They don’t need us as much.”

“On the other hand,” Kroll said, “Graduate students are becoming more interested in the experience. They are adults, and their programs give them more time than undergraduates have these days. Recently, we teamed up with the Fulbright program, hosting the Fulbright scholars. We showed them a different side of American culture. The Fulbright commission liked it and said it was one of the best years their students have ever had.”

Despite the changes, the formulas invented in 1953 still work, and BWF continues to make and keep friends all over the world.