

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

Page 3A • Monday, April 12, 2004

Grab a partner

Students team up to exchange lessons in language and culture

By Jose Cruz
THE BATTALION

At the beginning of the school year, CarrieAnn Hamilton, a sophomore anthropology major, was thinking back to her freshman year and remembering how uncomfortable she had felt coming to Texas A&M because she didn't know anybody. Hamilton said she thought about how awkward it felt and decided to help someone else out who was in the same situation. She decided to join Conversation Partners, a program set up by the English Language Institute (ELI) for international students to practice their

English. Students who are interested in the program fill out an information sheet and are matched up with a partner at the beginning of each semester. Partners meet once a week for an hour and talk about a variety of subjects ranging from school to concerts to sports. The program also allows international students to pick up on the subtle details of everyday American life that the classroom doesn't teach. Hamilton meets weekly with Renata Sostaric, an ELI student from Croatia, and said she is intrigued by Sostaric. "She's from a different country and has a different perspective," Hamilton said.

Sostaric said her initial perspective could be considered a stereotypical European view of America. When Sostaric arrived in America, she said she realized things were different than what she thought they would be.

"In Croatia, we only see movies and TV from America, and that's not always accurate. People from other countries may think that every other person in America is like Jim Carrey or stupid like Jessica Simpson, but it's not like that," she said. Apart from experiencing American culture firsthand, Sostaric has steadily been improving her English.

"In the beginning I was embarrassed to talk, and now I have much more confidence," she said. Hamilton and Sostaric said they will remain in contact with each other even after they complete the program.

"Renata and I have become great friends, and we often lose track of time at our meetings because we are having so much fun," Hamilton said. "I'm glad I did it. I just wish I could have started earlier."

When Er Wen Huang, an industrial engineering graduate student from Taiwan, first arrived at A&M, he said he would read his textbooks, go to class and go home. Huang said he felt he was missing out on a part of the college experience, so he joined the conversation partners program.

"I thought it would be a good way to involve myself in campus life, apart from school, and get a complete education," he said.

The program encouraged Huang to become more involved in campus life, and he is now closer to assimilating into American society.

"My goal is to keep learning about the world, and America is a big part of that world. For me, language is a bridge to having the ability to understand what other people are thinking," Huang said. "I am more comfortable now in social situations."

Michael Wang, a sophomore business administration major and Huang's conversation partner, said he agreed that Huang is much more comfortable now.

"I taught him that 'howdy' is not used outside of College Station. He thought that 'howdy' was used everywhere in America; he didn't know it was just used at A&M," he said.

Wang said he tries to teach Huang to speak more conversational English.

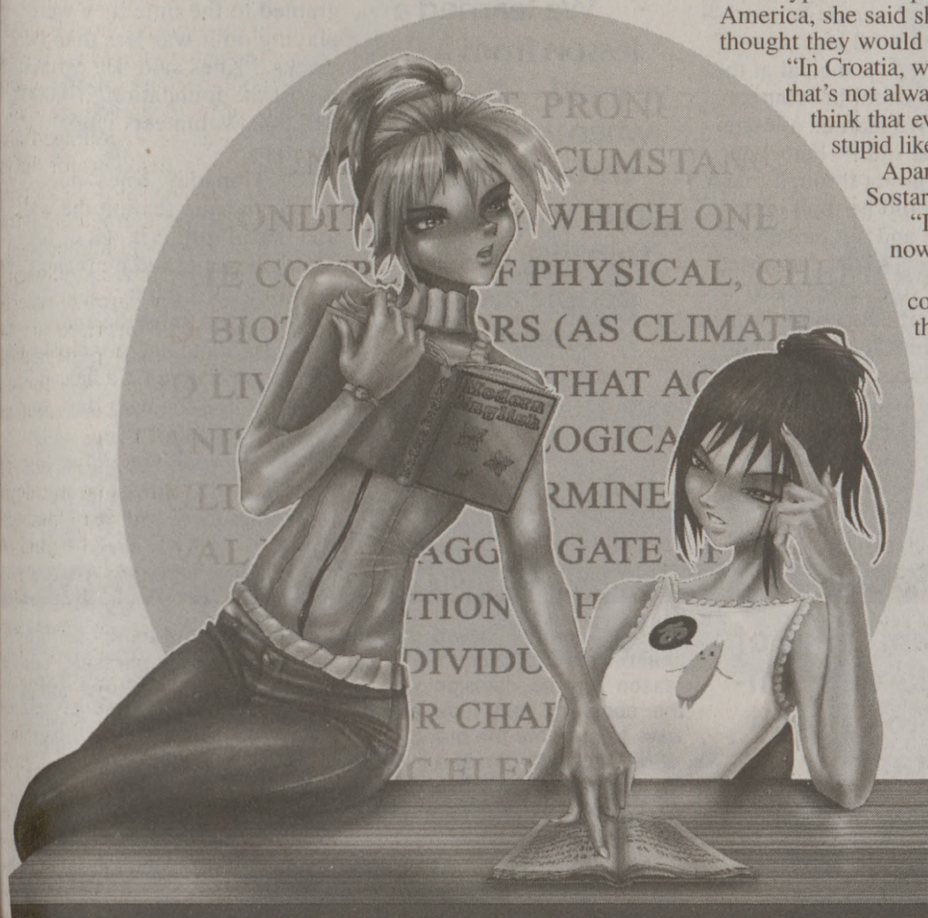
"When he's in Asia he doesn't get an opportunity to speak English outside of class," he said.

For Wang, the program was a chance to learn about a different culture from the one he grew up in and to think about things he never thought about before.

"I like to meet people who you would never get a chance to meet in Texas," Wang said. "For us, we don't get to meet many different groups of people so we always think of them in the way we see them on TV. They have the same image toward us Americans."

Wang said he thinks it is important to break down cultural stereotypes. Even if Americans are portrayed in a certain way in a movie, it doesn't mean that all Americans are like that, he said.

"It's kind of hard to learn about a different culture when you don't meet people from that culture. That's why meeting someone from another country helps with your cultural diversity at the University," Wang said. "I'm more open-minded to other people's lifestyles. The biggest part of college is outside of academics. The time in college you are supposed to branch out. Once I leave college I will probably just be working and then going home. You have to take advantage of every opportunity this university gives you."



"In Croatia, we only see movies and TV from America ... People from other countries may think every other person in America is like Jim Carrey or stupid like Jessica Simpson."

— Renata Sostaric
English Language Institute student

Muslim Students' Association – Texas A&M

presents...

THE WORLD IS BUT A MOMENT

A Photographic Odyssey Through the Muslim World

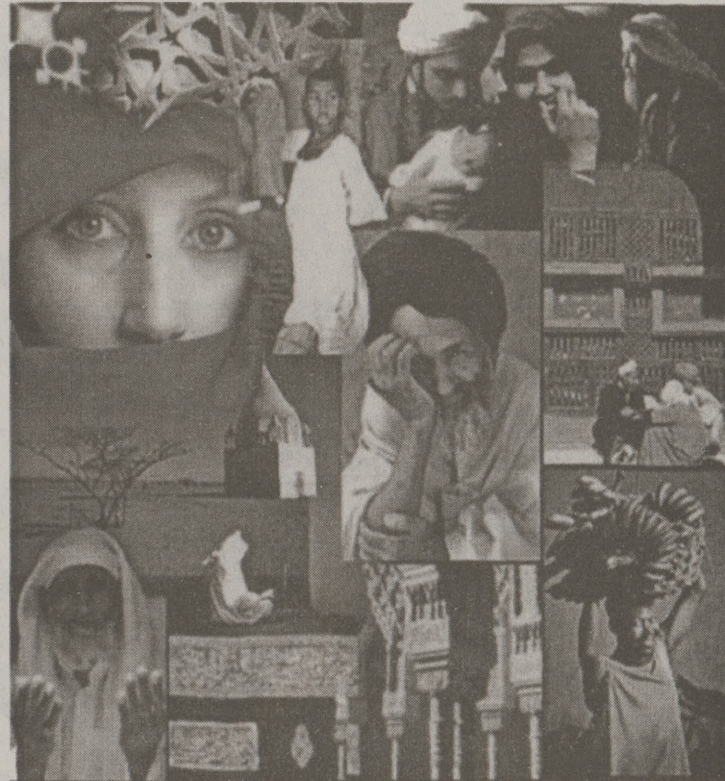
An Exhibit & Lecture by Internationally Acclaimed Photographer

Peter Sanders

Tuesday, April 13

6:30 PM, Stark Gallery

To be followed by a reception



Co-sponsors: Academy for Visual and Performing Arts, International Programs Office, Office of the Provost, VP of Student Affairs, Stark Gallery