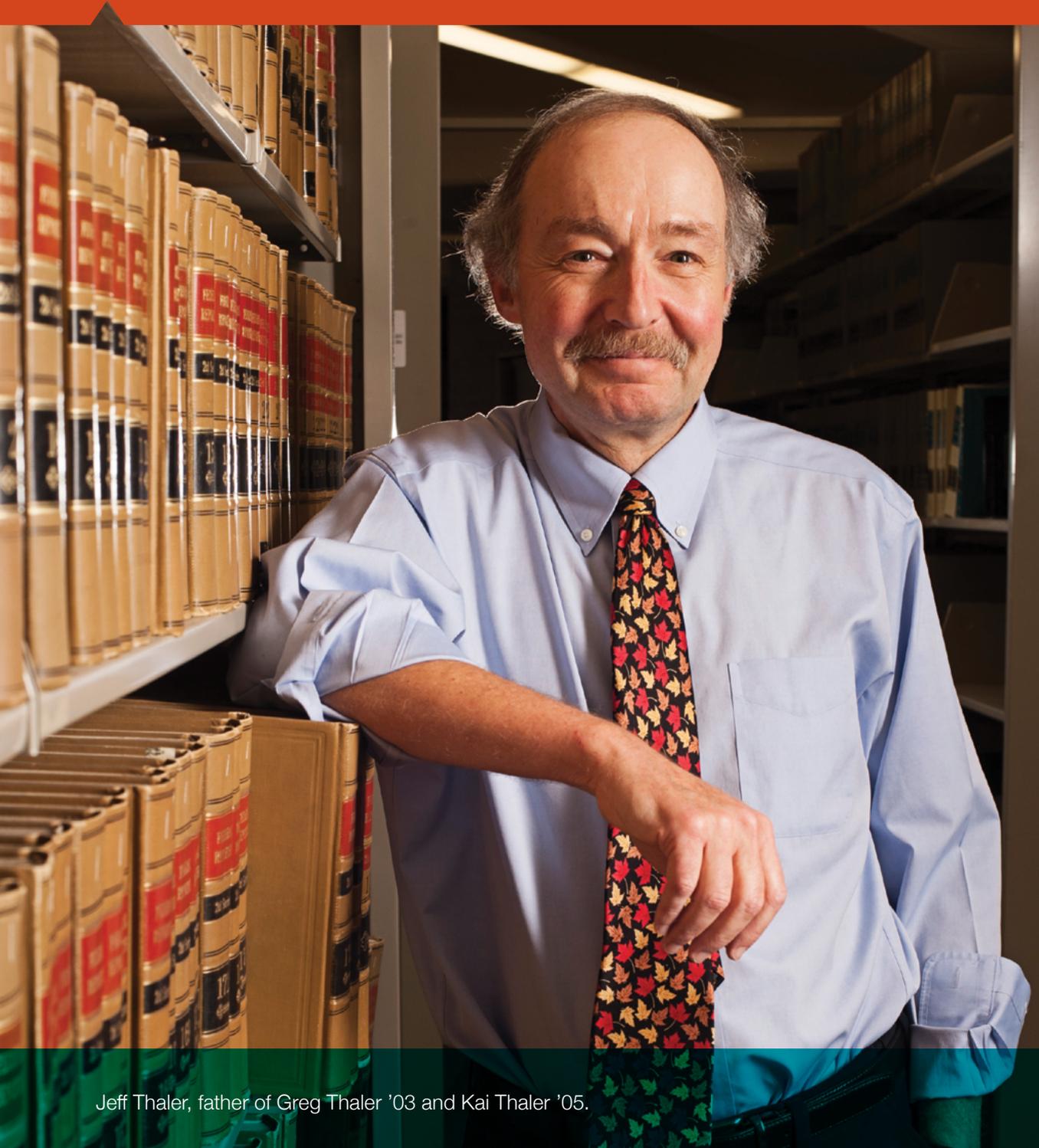


“People are spending more time sitting on their couches, interacting with their screens, and speaking with people who share their political views. They’re not talking with anyone face-to-face—no one is challenging them, no one is pushing them on their assumptions. If you’re spending eight hours a day reaffirming existing beliefs, then nothing changes.” —*Jeff Thaler*



Jeff Thaler, father of Greg Thaler '03 and Kai Thaler '05.

# Uncomfortable Learning

Former Waynflete parent Jeff Thaler spearheads an effort to bring immersive homestays to Portland

IN 1972, WHEN JEFF THALER WAS A sophomore at Williams College, he also worked as a funeral home employee, a farmer, and an autoworker. He walked a beat with a small-town police officer and lived with a disabled coal miner. Thaler inhabited these multiple worlds through an experiential education program started by Robert Gaudino, his political science professor.

Gaudino was at the forefront of the experiential education movement, which rejected the traditional pedagogical approach that kept college students sheltered. Gaudino's approach centered on the idea of "uncomfortable learning"—full immersion in (and active reflection on) environments that exposed students to different cultures, values, and ideas. "Bob recognized that you learn much more when you're outside your comfort zone," says Thaler.

Homestays and work placements were essential parts of the experience. Thaler and his classmates were responsible for finding their own work and making connections with individuals who were active in public agencies and institutions. They kept detailed journals, interviewed community members, and wrote papers at the end of each homestay. "We weren't just learning about others," says Thaler. "The self-reflection and self-awareness component was critical."

Convinced that immersive programs were an ideal way to achieve the goals of a liberal arts education, Thaler wanted to keep Bob Gaudino's ideas alive after he passed away. "There was no domestic experiential education

program that compared in scale to study-abroad programs, and there still isn't today," says Thaler. "With increasing diversity in the United States, I knew that American students could have meaningful experiences right here."

When he moved to Maine in 1979, Portland was already a destination for refugees and asylees. Thaler dove into the community in volunteering and mentoring roles. "It got me thinking about the Williams program again," he says. "Why do we spend so much money to send students abroad when we could provide them with an international experience here in Maine?" After seeking input from educators, service providers, and immigrant families, Thaler launched a program that connected Williams College students with host families in Maine. In January 2016, he expanded the program to Colby College.

## Immersive experiences in high school

One of Thaler's long-term objectives was to keep students and host families connected after the program's conclusion, which often proved to be a challenge with college students. As a former Waynflete parent (to Greg '03 and Kai '05), Thaler also believed that a homestay experience could have a greater impact at the high school level. "You can have a diverse student body, but it may not truly mesh," he says. "Students may not be learning as much from each other as they could."

"We weren't just learning about others. The self-reflection and self-awareness component was critical." —Jeff Thaler



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Jean-Claude, Maya Hamilton '16, Dider, Germaine, Audrey, and Penuel at home in Westbrook.

Thaler, with Iman Lipumba (a Williams alumna who had volunteered in Waynflete's African Literature course) crafted a proposal for an experiential homestay program for Waynflete students. Scheduling posed a potential roadblock—summers were problematic, and fitting a homestay into the academic calendar would be a challenge. Director of Student Affairs Lydia Maier '90, EAL (English as an Additional Language) Mentor Alain Nkulu, and EAL Coordinator Sue Stein were committed to the idea, though, and ultimately found a creative solution: make the homestay experience a Senior Project.

Each year, Waynflete seniors have the option to finish their regular coursework in May and spend the last four weeks of the school year engaged in a Senior Project, where they have the opportunity to pursue academic and co-curricular interests, investigate potential career paths, and get involved in community service.

Thaler presented the idea to Waynflete's senior class in December 2015. The inaugural program would run for four weeks: one week of preparation, a two-week homestay, and a final week that would conclude with a presentation to students, faculty, and parents.

**“We all need friends, connections, and lifelong relationships. Newcomers and refugees in our city are no different.”**

—Alain Nkulu

The team's primary concern was vetting student readiness and assessing whether applicants would be able to complete the program successfully. “We wanted to ensure that high schoolers could handle this level of responsibility,” says Maier. “We designed the application process in a way that encouraged students to think about what it would mean to be immersed in another culture.” The Waynflete team approached several seniors to discuss the opportunity. In the end, one student was accepted to the inaugural homestay program: Maya Hamilton '16.

### The homestay experience

Hamilton's first week focused on orientation. She reviewed materials prepared by Maier, Nkulu, Stein, and Thaler, and wrote an essay on the impact of race, ethnicity, national identity, socioeconomic class, and religion on her life. Hamilton accompanied Nkulu to a class at Portland Adult Education taught by former Waynflete parent Arline Saturdayborn (mother of Caitie Whelan '02) where she heard stories from refugees and asylees.

Because of Hamilton's vocational interest in education, Thaler arranged for her to be an EAL volunteer at Canal Elementary School in Westbrook. She would stay with a Rwandan family: parents Didier and Germaine, twin high school juniors Jean-Claude and Jean-David, and elementary students Audrey and Penuel.

Hamilton's journal entries reflect the degree to which she was overwhelmed by the warmth and generosity of her host family. To her surprise, she was most affected by her exposure to the family's

religious life. “While I’m not religious, I saw my personal beliefs and values reflected in their faith,” she wrote. “I saw it through their generosity and humbleness as a family.”

Listening to the family’s stories about the Rwandan genocide gave Hamilton a new perspective on transitions. “I’ve always struggled with change in my life, but the transitions they’ve gone through are astounding in comparison,” she wrote. “The horror and loss the family has experienced is incomprehensible, yet their sense of hope and faith shines through. If they can survive and be so present and hardworking, I can surely get through any obstacle.”

### The power of stories

Storytelling, which Maier calls “the foundation of identity formation,” plays a critical role in the homestay experience.

“Kids seek to understand their identities in high school through stories. There’s a lot of ‘what do other people think of me,’ but if you can change that to, ‘what are other people’s stories,’ you can set kids on a trajectory to be more curious and less self-conscious. My feeling about stories is that you’ve got to get close to them. With this project, students are participating in a live story that has no ending.”

Hamilton agrees. “There is a lot you can learn about immigrant resettlement from primary source documents, but there is no way to feel the emotion and personal connection through readings. This can only come from actually being there and listening—that human-to-human connection is crucial. The homestay helped me truly understand the struggle my host family endured.”

### Not just for students

The homestay program doesn’t just provide students with new cultural experiences. “It’s a two-way street,” says Alain Nkulu. “We all need friends, connections, and lifelong relationships. Newcomers and refugees in our city are no different.”

Nkulu comes to the Waynflete homestay program with a unique perspective. As an

“Their sense of hope and faith shines through. If they can survive and be so present and hardworking, I can surely get through any obstacle.”

—*Maya Hamilton '16*

asylee from the Congo, an adult education teacher in Portland, and twice a host for students from Thaler’s Williams College program, he believes the experiential homestay programs are equally important to host families.

“Having a native-born American in your home opens the door to learn more about U.S. culture,” he says. “When you’ve lived with somebody, you form a relationship with them that’s quite different from what you might have if you attend church or school together. My hope is that the friendships that form during these programs will continue to grow.”

### Immersion still matters

Some educators wonder whether immersive programs are now unnecessary given the greater diversity of the student body at schools like Waynflete. “It’s just not the case,” says Thaler, “We always learn at the end of our programs that there is as great a need as ever for immersion into the lives of others.”

Thaler says, “People are spending more time sitting on their couches, interacting with their screens, and speaking with people who share their political views. They’re not talking with anyone face-to-face—no one is challenging them, no one is pushing them on their assumptions. If you’re spending eight hours a day reaffirming existing beliefs, then nothing changes. The hands-on experiential approach may seem a bit old-fashioned, but it works. We can’t deal with the diversification of our country by ignoring each other or assuming the worst about each other. The more opportunities we have to get to know people and work with them, the more we appreciate who they are and where they’re coming from.”

“We have this sense that cultural immersion can only happen abroad. Maya’s experience proves that cultural immersion can be accessible to everybody. It can happen in our own community, a few blocks from the school.”

—Geoff Wagg

Head of School Geoff Wagg believes that local homestay programs will grow to be an important alternative to the overseas community service and language immersion trips that the school offers. “We have this sense that cultural immersion can only happen abroad,” he says. “Maya’s experience proves that cultural immersion can be accessible to everybody. It can happen in our own community, a few blocks from the school.”

“Maya had a powerful individual experience that focused on relationships with the family and the teachers she worked with,” says Maier. “But we can take this even further if we can grow the program.” With more students participating, Waynflete faculty have the opportunity to look thematically at the barriers, obstacles, and advantages of immersion. And since local programs are easier to scale up—and much less expensive—they can play an important role in fulfilling the school’s mission to prepare students to thrive in a multicultural global community.

### The Broader Mission

Maier is struck by the feeling of hope that the program engenders. “Today’s younger students see humanity in a completely different light than any generation before them. They know intuitively that it’s just not possible to keep everybody in a box anymore. The more experiences kids have with differences, the more equipped they are to live in this incredible multicultural environment. I find that it’s a really exciting time to be doing this kind of work with students.” 🌱

Visit <http://bit.ly/Thaler-TEDx> to watch Jeff Thaler’s 2011 TEDxDirigo talk, “Immersion in the Unfamiliar: An Education.”



Sue Stein, Maya Hamilton '16, Alain Nkulu, and Lydia Maier '90