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Study-abroad office makes the grade

Olivia Just, Correspondent

At the Stamford office of the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS), a sign hanging over one employee's cubicle cheerfully sums up the atmosphere of the place: "Relax."

"You know that feeling when you're coming to work in your car and you're worried about being 10 minutes late? It's not that kind of place," William Gertz, president and chief executive officer of AIFS, said. "Nobody is walking on eggshells."

The cultural exchange organization was ranked fourth among mid-size companies in Workplace Dynamics' survey of the top places to work in Fairfield, New Haven and Litchfield counties.

AIFS organizes a range of exchange programs, sending thousands of American and international students each year to crisscross the globe.



Allyson Grande, account rep for Camp America, and Spencer Smolinsky, client development for Camp America, talk in the hallway of The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) in Stamford, Conn. on Tuesday August 16, 2011. AIFS is a cultural student exchange organization that was ranked among the top places to work in the state. Photo: Dru Nadler / Stamford Advocate Freelance



The employee lounge at The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) in Stamford, Conn. on Tuesday August 16, 2011. AIFS is a cultural student exchange organization that was ranked among the top places to work in the state. Photo: Dru Nadler / Stamford Advocate Freelance

"We go by the credo, 'We bring the world together,'" Gertz said. "I think we're unusual because we're a mission-driven company."

This mission began in 1964, when Sir Cyril Taylor and his two partners left Proctor & Gamble to form an organization that could facilitate international travel for students. In 1967, AIFS enlisted the support of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy to start the AIFS Foundation, an affiliated nonprofit that provides grants and scholarships to exchange students. Now, with offices in 15 countries, AIFS places 50,000 students a year in their cultural exchange programs, including high school and college study-abroad experiences, au pair placement, gifted education, insurance services and camp counselor staffing. Taylor, a British native and world traveler, still runs the company as chairman.

In the Stamford office, perched on the seventh floor of a building on West Broad Street, the international influence is palpable; artistically framed travel photographs line the hallways, a large bulletin board on one wall is cluttered with brochures from cities around the world, and even Gertz's business card is printed in two languages, English and Chinese.

Many of the people who work for AIFS have a healthy dose of wanderlust themselves, and Gertz makes sure that everyone -- not just executives -- gets a chance to travel; members of each department attend conferences held in places such as Prague, Florence and Cancun.

"Employees in this company have a great opportunity to travel on all levels," Gertz said. "That's what keeps them here -- they meet the students and see the products of what they do."

Melanie French, executive director of the AIFS Foundation, joined AIFS directly out of college 22 years ago and has never looked back. A former exchange student herself, French had always known she wanted to work in international exchange.

"It's an opportunity to work with young students from all over the world and to see their lives kind of change," French said. "They step away with enduring friendships, life-long friendships."

Like French, many of those who work at AIFS have been with the organization for long stretches of time, and even those who do leave retain "a soft spot for the place," as Gertz put it.

"When people leave, they tend to keep in touch, much more so than other companies, because their lives were touched by what they did here," Gertz said.

However, there's also a good balance of young, fresh-out-of-college faces in the crowd, French said.

"If this is your area of interest, then yes, you come to stay," she said. "But it's also a nice launching place for young talent."

With a cyclical calendar of exchange program deadlines to meet, stress levels can run a little high at times, and AIFS has devised a few ways for employees to keep calm and carry on. The company's building includes a small gym and a lounge with a Wii, and AIFS often holds raffles or gives away Yankees tickets. During the summer months, Gertz will hold "Fun Fridays," little breaks held every Friday afternoon where the whole staff gathers for a themed party, perhaps with ice cream one week and Mexican food the next. Each September, the whole team participates in a weekend retreat to help build social connections.

"We do have a job that can have deadlines and late hours sometimes, so you need to make it feel enjoyable for everybody," French said. "We're all friends and we all have an open door policy. It's a pretty cohesive place."

Inside the office, too, management tries to maintain a relaxed, somewhat cozy environment. The hours are flexible, employees will sometimes bring their children and pets into the office and there's no real need to keep your voice down, as Gertz said he doesn't mind a bit of noise. The attitude is that, as long as the job is done and people give it their best, the little things don't matter.

"I try to have a really open company as much as I can," Gertz said. "We have great fights about politics, about (President) Obama. I like him, others don't; we have Republicans and Democrats. It's spirited, it's fun."

Gertz writes a weekly blog that mixes information about AIFS with news about his family, something that keeps the employees informed on important matters and brings a little of his personality into his work.

"It's all about personalizing work and making work not work," he said. "With this generation, I think atmosphere is becoming more and more important. If people are happy, they work harder."