

Florence German Restaurant

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News

With international influences, Shoals is continually becoming more of a melting pot

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• [ENLARGE](#) [BUY PHOTO](#) Jim Hannon/TimesDaily

Sujana Thapaliya, Sabin Shrestha, both from Nepal, and Elianna Samuel, from Canada, talk in Powers Hall on the campus of the University of North Alabama.

Susan Caron is one of many international residents who have moved to the Shoals in recent years.

Caron, originally from Berlin, moved to the Shoals in 2003 to be near her family.

"I like it here. It's calm, and I like the river," she said.

Caron liked the Shoals so much that she opened her own business, Hannelore's Bratpfanne Restaurant, in [Florence](#) and now shares the recipes of her home country with northwest Alabama.

"That's the nice part about the restaurant is getting to carry on our German traditions," Caron said.

Caron noted the German heritage in [St. Florian](#), as well as other international groups that are being embraced throughout the Shoals.

"It is time to welcome different cultures," Caron said. "The world is a melting pot."

The Shoals is continually becoming more of a melting pot, as international influences blend and co-exist with northwest Alabamians.

The international student population has continued to increase at the [University of North Alabama](#), and large industries with parent companies in different countries have put the Shoals on a world-wide radar as a good place to do business in the South.

In fact, three of the last big industries to announce their entrance to the Shoals' job market have been internationally-owned companies, said Forrest Wright, president of the Shoals Economic Development Authority.

Those companies - North American Lighting, owned by Koito Manufacturing Co. Ltd., of Japan, SCA Tissue North America, owned by Swedish-based Svenska Cellulosa Aktiebolaget, and National Alabama Corp., owned by National Steel Car Ltd. of Canada - all have made big impacts on the Shoals.

"I see our state and community beginning to seek international business," Wright said. "It is crucial that the state of Alabama and the Shoals area build on the international experience already occurring."

Wright said SEDA and others that deal with economic development will continue looking for companies that may want to learn how to do business with the Shoals. Wright said Gov. [Bob Riley](#) is leading the state, through trade missions, to different countries to present networking opportunities and build relationships with international countries or companies.

"2008 will be the most aggressive year for the international trade arm of the Alabama Development Office," Wright said.

Predictions are that good things will continue to happen in the Shoals, he said.

"Not only does this community have international flavor, I think it's even growing," he said.

The most recent company to announce coming to the Shoals, National Alabama Corp., has had a positive experience in doing business in Alabama, said Peter Earle, communications and public affairs counsel for National Steel Car Ltd., the parent company based in [Hamilton](#), Ontario. National Alabama Corp. is a rail car manufacturing company.

"It was a very serious competition to find the best location for the new facility," Earle said. "The Shoals area really came through all that. It competed and was successful in a very stringent competition, which is good news for the Shoals and good news for us."

Earle noted that, by and large, most of the employees who will be working at the plant in Barton Riverfront Industrial Park in [Colbert County](#) will not be from Canada, but rather be made up of those from the local and broader region.

The same is true for most local internationally-owned industries that don't have a visible international presence, but still have those international connections by company ownership.

One part of the Shoals that does have a highly visible number of individuals from other

countries is [UNA](#).

Through the fall of 2007, there were close to 1,000 international students attending [UNA](#) from 61 different countries that make up approximately 14 percent of the student body.

Since 1992, the university has heavily recruited international students "in order to enhance diversity and better prepare our American students at the university for the rigors of a globally competitive marketplace," said Dan Howard, vice president for administration and international relations at [UNA](#).

In the past six years, the international student program has grown almost 20 percent to 30 percent a year, with the largest number of students from India, Japan, Nepal, Turkey and China.

Howard said international students make many positive impacts on the university and the community.

"They bring different perspectives from throughout the world; they expose our domestic students to different cultures, and they help open the minds of our students to different possibilities," he said. "It makes [Florence](#) and the Muscle Shoals area more cosmopolitan. It still retains it's southern charm, but is more cosmopolitan."

Sujana Thapaliya, who is from Nepal, is studying at [UNA](#) to receive her Masters in Business Administration.

"After I came here, I found out that people here are good," she said. "I feel good over here, but it took me time to adjust. I've met so many people, and they've helped us in so many ways."

Having international students in the Shoals has made the area appealing to major corporations such as Japan-based North American Lighting, and influenced their decisions to situate in northwest Alabama, Howard said.

"Prior to (North American Lighting) coming, Forrest Wright arranged for (company representatives) to meet with our Japanese students and people from the National Collegiate Network, and they were highly impressed that we had 200 Japanese-speaking students here in the Shoals," Howard said. "(North American Lighting) indicated that was one of the reasons why they decided to come here."

Businesses, the university and the community have all benefitted from the many different international connections in the Shoals, said Steve Holt, president of the Shoals Chamber of Commerce.

"The Shoals, I think, is progressive, and the university sets a pace for that with the international students," Holt said. "In a global economy, it's great to see a response like that here."

Holt said it's vital for the Shoals to have relationships with other countries across the world.

"They bring in investment; they bring in jobs and create jobs. It opens the community to the world and shows the rest of the world that we are an open market," he said.

Caron said that someday she would like to go back and visit Germany with her children and grandchildren, but for now, she wants to savor life in the Shoals.

"We're rooted down here, and even if it wasn't for the restaurant, I'd be here," Caron said.

Those who embrace the international connections the Shoals has will see both the cultural and economical benefits of having these networks that span across the world, Wright said.

"We're fortunate to be in a community that has movement and is fairly receptive," he said. "Our community has and hopefully will continue to prosper, both in its ability to and desire to welcome change."

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