He's called the principal from China, but Mike Thomley would much prefer being known as the principal from Port Washington.

Both descriptions are apt, but the latter is far more accurate, said Thomley, who just a few months ago was living in Chengdu, a city of more than 14 million people in the heart of China, with his wife Allison and their three young children.

Lincoln Elementary School Principal Mike Thomley, who was an administrator in Chengdu, China, before being hired in May to lead the Port Washington school, posed next to a wire sculpture of the school's namesake in the courtyard. Photo by Bill Schanen IV

Now the family has found a new home half a world away in Port Washington, where Thomley is the new principal of Lincoln Elementary School.

"I had been to Port Washington twice before and had always dreamed of living here near the lake," he said. "But I never imagined that I'd actually move here, much less to be fortunate enough to work here."

So far, Lincoln Elementary School is everything he hoped it would be, said Thomley, who has

been on the job for about two months.

“I have five siblings, so I know all about family, and that is the atmosphere at this school. Immediately I felt like I was surrounded by family here,” he said. “The staff is great and I am very fortunate to be working with such an involved parent group that has done so much for this school.”

Thomley, 40, will get an even better feel for Lincoln Elementary when classes start Thursday, Sept. 1.

“My goal is to know every student’s name by Oct. 1, but I’m giving myself to Nov. 1 just to be safe,” he said.

For a man who’s used to culture shock, adjusting to life in Port Washington has been easy.

Thomley, who grew up on his family’s dairy farm near the tiny town of Hixton in western Wisconsin, taught fifth and first grades in Hudson, Wis., for 11 years before deciding to teach his children just how large the world is.

“I wanted my children to have an international experience while they were still young, and I didn’t want it to be a tour. I wanted to live it,” he said.

So the family left its home in  Hammond, Wis., and moved 7,000 miles away to China, where Thomley took the position of director of instruction at Quality School International of Chengdu.

“My job was kind of a cross between superintendent and principal,” he said.

Although an American school, Quality School International of Chengdu had, as its name suggests, a decidedly international feel.

“We had students from 27 different countries and teachers from 11 different countries,” Thomley said, noting that the parents of his students typically worked for large international corporations like Chevron and Volvo.

“The average student probably attended the school for between six and 18 months. I can’t remember any student who was there for more than three years,”

Thomley said. “Teachers came and went all the time.”

In Chengdu, Thomley found the experience he wanted for his children, one that couldn’t have been more different than life in Hammond or Port Washington.

The capital of the Sichuan Province, Chengdu is an economic hub of western China. Although quite modern in many regards, it continues to embrace its history, Thomley said.

“Keep in mind this is a city of almost 15 million people that had only about 100,000 Europeans

and maybe 5,000 Americans," he said. "We were different. We stood out. The people there always wanted to touch my daughter's hair because it was so different than theirs.

"When we were on our way back we stopped in Chicago and my daughter Anna said, 'Dad, no one is looking at us any more.'"

Not surprising, language was a challenge in Chengdu. Students at Thomley's school came from throughout the world and were conversant in English to varying degrees. To communicate with the people of Chengdu, Thomley and his family had the constant help of an interpreter, but even then things were lost in translation.

"I wanted to resurface the basketball court at school by rubberizing the surface," he said. "That translated into me wanting to put old tires all over the court. No one could figure out how that would make the court better."

Although living in China was a valuable experience for his children, Thomley knew Chengdu wasn't home, and after a year there he began looking for a job in America. It was a cousin of an in-law who alerted him to the opening at Lincoln Elementary School.

Thomley applied for the job and then, in one of the most remote parts of the world, received some very welcome news from Heidi Belohlav, secretary to Port Washington-Saukville School Supt. Michael Weber.

"We were near Tibet when Heidi contacted me about the job," he said. "Here I am basically in the middle of nowhere talking about being principal of a school in Port Washington. I was so nervous I'd lose the signal and we'd be cut off."

Thomley had to get up early for his first interview with the selection committee, which was a teleconference conducted via Skype.

"It was1 a.m. in Chengdu and 2 p.m. in Port Washington," he said.

Thomley impressed the committee, which identified him as one of two finalists, and was soon on a plane bound for Port Washington.

He spent less than 24 hours in town but instantly knew he wanted the job and a home in Port Washington.

"It was like a good glove — a perfect fit," he said.

Thomley was back in China when he received the news in May that he got the job. Within a month, he and his family were on their way to Port Washington.

While Port felt like home right way, the family was without a house. For six weeks they lived at the Holiday Inn Harborview downtown.

“Imagine living in a hotel for six weeks with three little kids,” Thomley said. “But the people of Port were fantastic. Maybe he felt sorry for me, but one of the charter boat captains on Nicky Boy even gave us a boat ride.”

The family has since found a home on Montgomery Street, just four blocks from Lincoln Elementary School. That means that the Thomley children — kindergartner Nolan, second-grader Anna and fourth-grader Molly — will be seeing a lot of their father.

“They like the idea of having their dad for a principal, I think,” Thomley said.

Thomley, who could have stayed on the family farm or been a career military man, said his new job at Lincoln Elementary School is further proof he made the right career decision.

“I loved life on the farm, but I always knew I wanted to be a teacher,” he said.

Thomley left the family farm to enlist in the U.S. Navy. He served six years before being medically discharged, then earned his teaching degree from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

He said he enjoyed his time in the Hudson School District, as well as in Chengdu, but is particularly excited about his new job at Lincoln Elementary School.

Referring to the controversy surrounding the budget-repair law proposed by Gov. Scott Walker, Thomley said, “I missed all the debate over the Walker thing, but I know the impact it had in a lot of schools.

“It’s different here. The teachers know they are supported by the School Board and have told me as much.

“There is such a good atmosphere here. Just look at our school. These teachers don’t need to be at work for another week, but they are all over the school because they care.”

Thomley said he was also been overwhelmed by the Parent Association of Lincoln School.

“I’ve worked with parent groups before, but this group is a little different. It’s done so much for this school and is so involved. It’s really great to see that,” he said.

“My first goal is not change what’s working, but rather keep it going,” he said. “I haven’t been here that long, but it’s been long enough for me to know that this feels like home.”