Sharing Albania

International Education Week was celebrated in November, but the spirit of that week continued afterwards, much to Erblin’s delight. Check out his video, in which you can witness what this day meant to him:

I did a presentation at my host brother’s elementary school on Epcot Day, an annual tradition that allows students to “travel the world” by visiting stations throughout the school. In each “country,” students learn about its culture from volunteers who have lived abroad, and make a craft item unique to that country. I applied and won the opportunity to be part of this program. There were 10 classes with 50-60 students per class that listened to my presentation. It was an amazing feeling being in the middle of those kids who kept asking questions about my country. I showed them videos of traditional dances and a short movie that I created about my town in Albania. We discussed schools, unique cities to visit, etc. At the same time I was doing the presentation, there were two other rooms where students were creating traditional Albanian jackets out of paper bags. There was a whole hall dedicated to Albania, and my host family and some teachers helped me to prepare the activity that everybody enjoyed so much.

—Erblin (YES, Albania), hosted by the Fragiotta family (OH)

Winter Firsts

On January 1, 2015, I went ice skating with my host family, and three days later we went to the town of Bozeman for a basketball game and skiing. I had ice skated a long time ago in Egypt, but I had never skied before—my family taught me, and I had so much fun!

—Hend (YES, Egypt), hosted by the Jones family (MT)
December was one exciting month for me. I completed the milestone of 50 hours of community service and also did a lot of fun activities in snow. This vlog shows some of the highlights of the month, including Christmas and New Year’s.

—Sohaib (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Reichert family (WY)

Beautiful End to 2014

December was one exciting month for me. I completed the milestone of 50 hours of community service and also did a lot of fun activities in snow. This vlog shows some of the highlights of the month, including Christmas and New Year’s.

—Sohaib (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Reichert family (WY)

Hitting the ice rink is only one of the many activities Sohaib walks you through in his vlog.

The First (and Best) Christmas

I’ve been waiting for Christmas break for a long time. I started shopping early as I was so excited. My friends, family, and community made my first Christmas so special. I was invited to three Christmas parties, two with my amazing friends and one with the “Fusion Group,” which is a youth group at church. I learned a lot about American culture during the holidays. Wherever you go, you see beautiful lights, and everyone is dressed with a Christmasy item. Teachers give candies to students. Everything shows that Christmas is here. It was the best Christmas ever!

—Soumaya (YES, Tunisia), hosted by the Basta family (PA)

Soumaya (red hijab) strikes a pose with her “closest friends.”

An East Coast Road Trip

On the morning of December 12, I left Maine for a trip down the Eastern seaboard with my exchange student Ilya, as well as two other exchange students, Felix and Renaud.

We spent time at Disney World, Universal Studios, and SeaWorld (where Renaud swam with the dolphins!), as well the Florida beaches of Daytona, Fort Lauderdale, and Miami. We also visited Ernest Hemingway’s home, rode bikes along Ocean Drive in Miami, and stopped by the White Castle where Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle was filmed.

—Gil Roy, community coordinator (ME) and host dad of Ilya (FLEX, Russia)

Felix (Germany), Renaud (Belgium), and Ilya, PAX students hosted in Maine, enjoy the warm Daytona sun.

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**Touch the Skies!**

“Ho Ho Ho!” This Christmas break marked the most amazing time of my life! My host family took me to Hatcher Pass in Wasilla, AK. We stayed in a beautiful cabin for two nights. In the daytime we went to the top of a 5,000-foot mountain called the Government Peak in Matanuska Valley for skiing! This is the same place where Olympic skiers come to practice, and it was the experience of a lifetime. The ascent was a little exhausting and slow, but the downhill part was breathtaking! Skiing at 5,000 feet above sea level is only possible here in Alaska. Skiing down the same hill as the legendary Olympic athletes was a little overwhelming! I am so thankful for the love and care of my host family, which I will forever cherish.

—Saadman (YES, Bangladesh), hosted by the Lubeck family (AK)

**Feeling Merry**

Happy New Year to every exchange student and their host families! This was my first actual Christmas. In my country, Georgia, we celebrate Christmas on January 7, and it’s not as big a deal as New Year’s. This year, I had the best Christmas ever, just like in the movies—I say this phrase a lot! Christmas lights everywhere, songs about Christmas, my little host sister waking everyone up at 6:00 a.m., all excited about Santa’s visit and presents—waking up early has never been so joyful!

I hope every student had a great Christmas. I wish everyone a happy exchange year. May the second part of our year be full of excitement, happiness, joy, and success.

—Tinatin (FLEX, Georgia), hosted by the Anderson family (WI)

**Gingerbread Fun**

December was a very memorable month for me since I got to celebrate Christmas for the very first time of my life. Although Christmas was fun, I really enjoyed Christmas Eve more. On that day we went to watch a movie in the afternoon, did shopping, and played games. At night we wrapped the gifts and did something I had never done before: my host family and I made gingerbread houses and decorated them. All the gingerbread houses turned out fantastic.

Christmas taught me that Americans care for their families a lot and that you should always try to promote happiness in any way you can.

—Syed (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Hume family (MA)
Days of Yore

One of the most memorable things for me this month was the winter formal dance. My friends invited me to be in their group, and we had fun from the beginning until the end: planning the activities, looking for dresses, taking pictures, dancing, and ice skating. The theme of the dance was the 1920s, and we were really lucky to have the opportunity to take pictures with my host grandpa’s car from those years.

I really liked the dance. American teenagers make it really amazing and very exciting. And as an evening activity, we went to the skating rink with Christmas lights in downtown Salt Lake City. I wish dances in Russia were like that, and I will try to introduce my friends to this tradition. I am really thankful for my friends who made that day unforgettable.

—Yuliya (FLEX, Russia), hosted by the Millers (UT)

Talents Unearthed in America

I had a great opportunity to join the girls’ soccer team even though I had never played before! In Thailand, not many girls play; there is not even a girls’ team at school. So, I have only played with a ball with my brother and cousins, but it was not even soccer. Over the course of the season, my coach and friends taught me how to play. I thought it was very exciting! After the season ended, our coach invited everybody to an awards dinner. Guess what? I was awarded “Most Aggressive Award!” I can do it! Now, soccer is one of my favorite sports.

—Maris (Thailand), hosted by the Nygren family (MN)

Once a Team, Forever a Team!

The first thing I did when I entered my American school was join the volleyball team. Yes, three-hour practices were tiring, but I did not just join a team, I joined a family. We watched movies, volunteered, and even went to church.

One lady from church even took us to Maine. There, we got a chance to be a part of a real cooking school, try delicious meals, and see the Atlantic Ocean. I will never forget walking on wet sand with no shoes on with my closest friends right on the Eve of New Year!

—Ulviyya (FLEX, Azerbaijan), hosted by the Strickhart family (NH)

Ulviyya and teammates Emma and Emily ring in the New Year on the coast of Maine.
Mid-Year Reflections

I feel at home. Honestly, I didn’t think it would feel this comfortable. I’m really happy with my host family and friends.

So far, I experienced my first Thanksgiving and spent Christmas and New Year without my natural family for the first time. I wish I would have learned more words, but now I can speak more fluently and understand American English without trouble. At first, it was hard. Some things that are different from my school in Mexico are that we don’t take buses at home, and we have all our classes in the same room (the teacher moves). Here, we have pep rallies, a lot of sports teams, and homeroom each Wednesday.

I have met a lot of incredible people. I think this experience is helping me with my maturity, because now I understand how important family is. (By the way, it’s the first time that I’ve seen snow, and I really like it!)

—Michelle (Mexico), hosted by the Smith family (WV)

Neena (YES, India) is just one of the amazing people Michelle (right) has met so far.

Discovering Myself

The person I remember myself to be is a shy, indecisive, and impatient girl. Now, I see a confident girl who knows her goals, priorities, and how to use her time productively.

I have become more adventurous, outgoing, caring, meticulous, and confident. Who thought I could play the piano, go zip lining, have a bank account, or organize fundraisers for a real cause at the age of 16?

Thomas Jefferson said: “If you want something you’ve never had, you must be willing to do something you’ve never done before.” As I broke through my comfort chamber in America this year, I found a version of myself I always wanted to be.

—Anosha (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Campanas family (WI)

My Winter Break

We had an unforgettable Christmas: decorating the tree, singing carols, wrapping presents, and opening them with great expectations. It didn’t matter for us how cold it was outside, we were warm inside of our hearts. And then came New Year’s: eating good food, popping balloons, watching movies, playing games, and sipping hot chocolate near the fireplace. We also had so much fun playing outside: sledding, snowboarding, making snowmen, and having snowball fights…so many precious memories.

It was also the right time to start with new steps; because the halfway point is already gone, and I think it is very important to be present where you are. I encourage exchange students and everyone else: take advantage of your opportunities and never let them go. We just need to give and receive as much as we can and make as many memories of moments with big smiles on our faces as possible!

—Liana (FLEX, Armenia), hosted by the Syverson family (MN)
A Magical Trip

I imagine that when students come to the U.S. for this program, there is always some concern about how they will adapt to their new environment and get along with everyone. Throughout our entire trip to Disney World, Anastasiya was nothing less than a blessing to have as a part of our family. She came ready for the long car ride, interacted wonderfully with everyone on the trip, and exhibited a positive attitude throughout. She never expressed anything less than sincerity and openness to being a part of our family, a real interest in the world around her, and an overall excitement about everything she saw and did with us on this trip.

While we tried not to play “20 Questions” to test her knowledge of Turkmenistan and the U.S., we liked hearing about her home, the process she went through to join this program, and the transitions she made once she arrived. Anastasiya was engaging and always had a wonderful outlook and attitude. And of course, she enjoyed every minute that we were at the parks, and it was fun to watch her grasp the Disney experience. She did all this while also representing your program, her homeland, and her parents in a wonderful light.

—Steve Mikell (AL), father of Anastasiya’s (FLEX, Turkmenistan) friend Heidi

A New Year’s Eve Wedding

We rang in the New Year at our neighbor’s wedding. Jala thought the ceremony was a very special and unique American experience, but when the wedding party hit the dance floor, she realized she hadn’t seen anything yet!

—Teresa Gross (WI), host mom of Jala (YES, West Bank)

First 2015 Birthday

We spent New Year’s Eve at “First Night Warrenton,” our town’s celebratory event that includes dozens of family-friendly performances to enjoy in the hours leading up to midnight. Our exchange student Wadhah volunteered at the event prior to joining us and many others to ring in January 1, 2015, which also happened to be his 18th birthday.

Because we are a small town, we counted “up” to midnight based on when the courthouse clock began to strike 12. Right after recording this video, I approached those leading songs on the courthouse steps to ask if we could make note of his birthday. Although I couldn’t record the moment, it was wonderful! They called Wadhah up to the top of the courthouse steps, announced that he was an exchange student from Yemen celebrating his birthday, and led the crowd of about 300 in singing “Happy Birthday!”

—Nancy Bonnaire (VA), host mom of Wadhah (YES, Yemen)
**Stepping it up, with Relish!**

Anastasiia from Ukraine steps it up in a creative way with host siblings and cousins in a wonderful parody of “Jealous” by Nick Jonas. Host brother Matt Pace wrote the lyrics and sang lead, while Anastasiia and the other girls sang back up and danced up a storm. What a fun way to put vocal and dance talents to work!

—Margaret Hoppe, community coordinator (NV)

**Icy Fun in Boston**

Winter time is here, and it has brought plenty of snow with it! On December 30, I hit the road to Boston along with the other exchange students, our coordinator, and some host siblings. We wandered through the New England Aquarium and were amazed at the beauty of the life underwater.

Later, we headed to an ice skating rink to skate together. It was the first time skating on the ice for some of us, including me. We fell a couple of times, but we never failed to keep laughing. Indeed, it was cold, but we greatly enjoyed our time. Boston proved to be a magical and stunning city. Like many others, this trip was a blast for all of us. I thank my coordinator, Kris Hales, for always planning incredible trips to take us on. This exchange year in New Hampshire is for sure one of my best experiences so far; it has introduced me to wonderful friends from all over the globe. I look forward to what is yet to come!

—Maria (YES, Lebanon), hosted by the Emery-Gerossie family (NH)

**The Beauty of Different Cultures**

I gave the presentations at church and at my high school in front of about 300 people. During my presentations, I taught my audiences how to say some phrases, do a traditional Thai greeting, and how to do dance like a native.

When I asked my American dad what he learned from my presentation, he said “I learned about Thai culture, costumes, foods, etc. I learned that the Thai language is very difficult. Every time I say something in Thai, it’s wrong.” He also said that it is important to learn about other cultures, because you can better understand and respect why people are the way they are.

I learned that it is very important to learn and understand other cultures, because it not only makes us well-educated, but it would also solve a lot of misunderstandings between cultures. It helps us see the beauty of different cultures and appreciate the differences and similarities.

—Ramita (YES, Thailand), hosted by the Lee family (UT)
We Want to Hear from You!

Whether you have considered hosting a high school exchange student, sending your teen abroad, having an exchange student at your school, working locally to support an international student, or you simply want to learn more about what it is we do, feel free to give us a call at 800.555.6211.

Already involved and have something to share for a future issue? Regardless of your relationship to PAX, we are always accepting interesting content (stories, photos, videos, etc.) for next month’s issue at paxpress@pax.org. Click here for full details.