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Pax academic exchange

PAXPRESS

The Newspaper for Exchange Students, Host Families, and Schools

International Family

As we are halfway through the year, now seems like a good time to reflect on what I've learned so far.

A home is where friends meet, family gathers, and love grows. A family isn't only blood, it is the people in your life who want you in theirs, would do anything to see you smile, accept you for who you are, and love you no matter what. My PAX family is composed of my host family, friends, and coordinator's family. I've witnessed many firsts and learned about the U.S. and many other countries. Learning about traditions and cultures makes you realize how different but at the same time how similar people are. It doesn't matter your religion, dress, or values. All countries are in the same world, and it is our job to make it safe. Being an exchange student is a good start.

—Alejandra (Venezuela), hosted by the Breakey family (OH)

From warmer (but equally happy) days, clockwise from top are Alejandra and some of her international family: Aigerim (FLEX, Kyrgyzstan), Maheen (YES, India), Dure (YES, Pakistan), Rebecca (Maheen's host sister), Juan (YES, Suriname), and Amir (FLEX, Tajikistan).

Making Cookies and Memories

The annual movie night sleepover was a blast! After group games, we watched *Home Alone* and *Elf*, two holiday classics. The next day, we slept in and enjoyed a delicious breakfast and leftover snacks, before the students made pizza from scratch, including the dough! The flour was flying, and they even broke into song! We then baked and decorated over 300 cookies, half of which were donated to the homeless shelter. Students boxed up the other half and mailed them to college students, including letters that shared a little bit about themselves. Fun was had by all!

—Marie Lackore (WI), community coordinator

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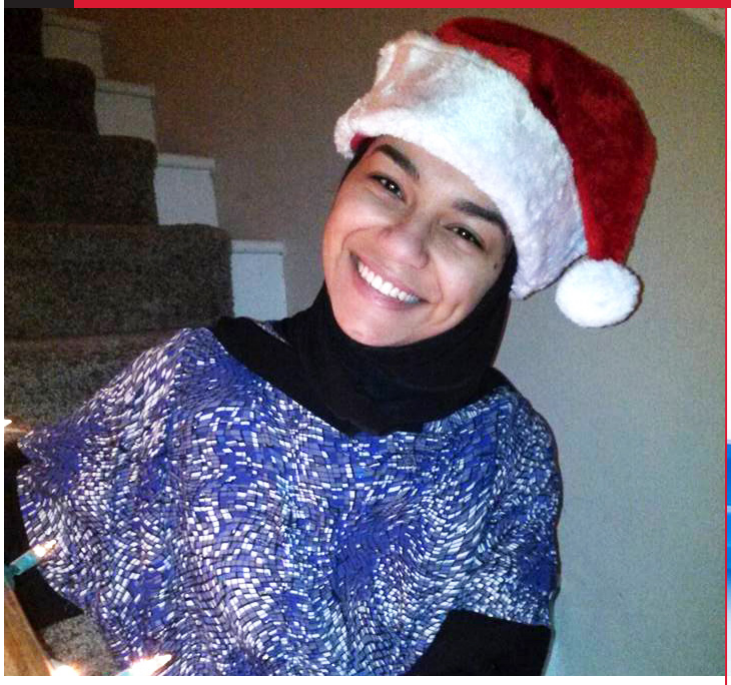
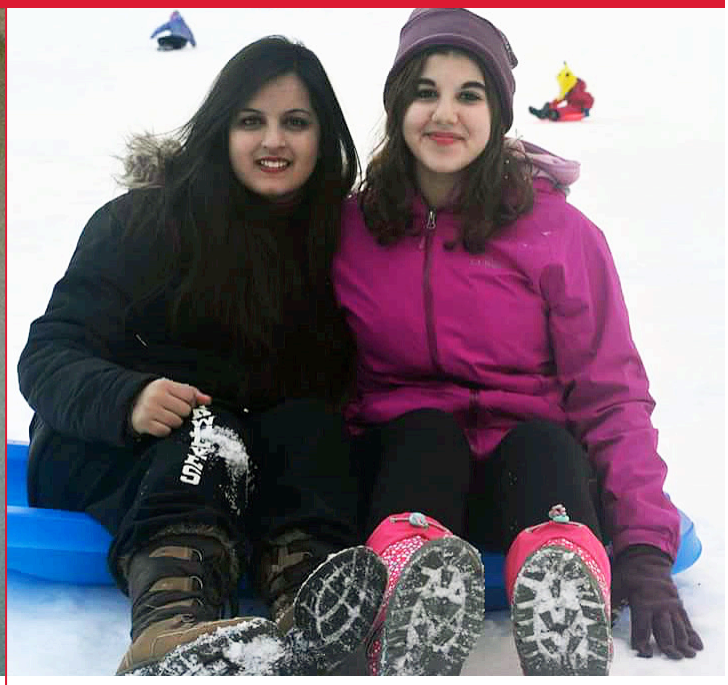
Shanza and Ariba (YES, Pakistan) pose—pre-music video.



Yara is the jolliest of elves!



Nimra (left) and Nour (YES, Tunisia) prepare to slide down a snowy slope.

My First American Christmas

Christmas is always fun for everyone
Wrapping gifts and sitting under the tree
Lighting and jingling in the house
Christmas songs and bells are all around
On Christmas Day we share love and joy while exchanging gifts
Having merriment of eating a big Christmas meal
Making everlasting golden memories
Christmas came to cherish my exchange year.

—Yara (YES, Egypt), hosted by the Brunner family (IL)

Let it Snow

Being an exchange student from Pakistan, I was really excited to see snow for the first time in my life. When it snowed for the first time in New Hampshire, my host family was excited for me too. The trees are so pretty when covered with snow! I bought some good winter jackets and shoes and went out to play in the snow. I tried all sorts of amazing things, like skiing, ice skating, snowboarding, and sledding. I fell so many times. It was hard for me to even walk on snow, but I didn't give up. At last I learned a bit of everything. It was so much fun!

—Nimra (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Westlake family (NH)

Every Day is Worth Remembering

Nothing is better than emerging in a new culture, learning new things, and meeting new people. I am thankful that I got such an amazing host family. During the holidays, they showed me different sights in Michigan and Ohio and did so many things for me that have made my exchange experience more than perfect. I see my host family as my real family and my friends as the best friends anyone could ever ask for.

I also have had the chance to experience traditions like Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and snow! I am really thankful to YES and PAX for giving me a chance to learn, share, and explore.

—Laiba (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Stewart family (MI)

Laiba (brown hat), along with (clockwise) Aizhan (FLEX, Kazakhstan), Adina (FLEX, Kazakhstan), and Shazza (YES, Qatar) enjoy the snow—a first for Laiba!

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Nicole, Milana (host sister), Nick (host brother), Andrea (host mom), and Nick (host dad) rang in 2016 out on the ocean.

Unforgettable Moments

Living in Florida is amazing, but what is making this year incredible is my host family and my friends. I went to the beach the day after Christmas and celebrated New Year's Eve on a boat with my family and friends. We even rode an airboat in the Everglades!

—Nicole (Italy), hosted by the LaMaina family (FL)

Watch out for your fingers, Paul!

Getting Along With a Gator

Paul has encountered wide open spaces, all things cowboys, and of course Tex-Mex fare so far here in Texas. For the holiday break, we traveled to Louisiana to visit family and try some Cajun cuisine. The spices and depth of flavor were new and exciting to Paul. We also visited an alligator farm. Finishing out the break, we checked out Dallas and went to a Cowboys game. Paul enjoyed the sights and sounds of football fever. This was an exciting and engaging holiday break!

—Denise Bonds (TX), host mom of Paul (Germany)

Gloria and her host parents take a walk by the waterfalls.

Holiday Happenings

Over the break, we went to Gulf Shores, AL, and I had so much fun and met a lot of new family members. We met again in Huntsville for a Christmas party, where we played Dirty Santa (gift exchange also known as White Elephant or Yankee Swap), and visited the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. We also went camp-ing in Brevard, NC, where we hiked to the waterfalls from *The Hunger Games*. It was there that I ate my first S'more, and it was amazing! This year is going by so fast!

—Gloria (Spain), hosted by the Frentzel family (GA)

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Get Involved!

Resolute Liza

If you had met Yelyzaveta (Liza) four or five months ago, you likely would have found her quiet and passive. Joining debate has given her the opportunity to challenge herself and tap her inner strengths.

Debate isn't the first class most students pick, but Liza isn't like most students. With a pinch of intrigue and a whole lot of "I'm going to do this" attitude, her adventure began. Her first tournament was grueling and disappointing, but she didn't give up. Instead, Liza enrolled in every tournament offered at her level. Eventually, she closed out the season with a third place trophy to be proudly displayed at school with the others!

Her confidence has grown exponentially. Upon meeting her now, one notices her eye contact, verbal confidence, knowledge of current events, and a friendly willingness to challenge opinions. She hopes to start a debate club back home after this year.

—Courtney Wieczorek (MO), host mom of Yelyzaveta (FLEX, Ukraine)

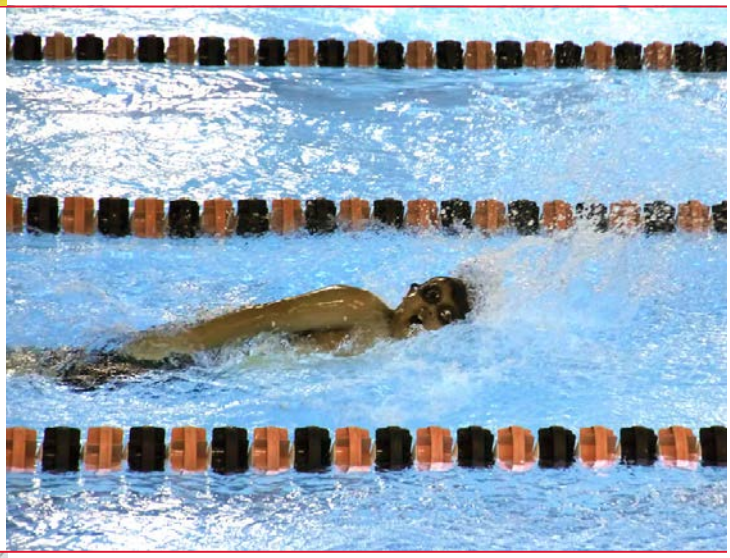
A poised Liza poses pre-debate.

"The Cold Never Bothered Me Anyway"

Winter officially started long ago. The cold has always made people feel kind of lazy—but not me. I turned this winter into the hottest one ever.

Unlike other people, who wear the thickest piece of clothing against the cold, I confidently take all those heavy things off of me, and just wearing a swimsuit, dive freely to the bottom of the pool. Yes, I joined swimming as my winter sport! So far we have beaten five schools, for a record of 5-0, an "unbeatable" team. We still have two more schools to compete with before the end of the season.

—Boby (YES, Indonesia), hosted by the Miller family (IL)



Boby helps his team remain undefeated in the pool.

Mountain Sledding

Winter with its snow has so far been a blast! Some of my fellow exchange students went sledding on a nearby mountain. Despite the fact that it was the first time for so many of us to see snow, we did great. It certainly was one of the *coolest* experiences we have had so far!

—Shukri (YES, Somaliland), hosted by the McLaughlin family (MA)

Daniela (YES, Palestine), Marisa (Germany), Shukri, and Fa (Thailand) are now experts on a sled!

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Finding Common Ground

One of my exchange students, Aida from Kazakhstan, recently went with me to the Mosque of Nasreen in San Luis Obispo, CA, to attend a presentation by Dr. Rushdie Abdul-Cader.

The former PAX/YES host father, and prominent local physician and police officer, spoke about countering violent extremism, both religious and political, and shared many ideas, such as how Islamophobia breeds violent extremism. He offered examples from around the world, including his own personal stories.

Dr. Abdul-Cader demonstrated a great example of American grassroots activism with thought-provoking ideas and suggestions for each and every one of us. Aida and I had an interesting exchange afterwards, relating the concepts in the presentation to her own experience both here and in her home country.

—Jan Walters (CA), community coordinator

Aida (FLEX, Kazakhstan) takes a moment to pose with Dr. Rushdie Abdul-Cader at the Mosque of Nasreen.

Space Oddity

Each year we take our students to Space Center Houston, NASA's center for human spaceflight activities. They always love it!

Twelve students, representing Ukraine, Germany, Serbia, Thailand, China, and Brazil, made the trip on January 9, visiting the Vehicle Mock-Up Facility, where we viewed mock-ups of the International Space Station parts, the new Orion capsule, rovers, robots, and space suits.

The Saturn V rocket impressed the students the most. The most powerful rocket ever built and operated, its design played a major role in landing Americans on the moon. One piece of history I share with all my students is the fact that the very first word spoken from the moon was "Houston." Neil Armstrong said, "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." That makes Texans proud!

A few of the kids tried out a flight simulator and discovered what it was like to fly and maneuver an aircraft, which they discovered was not so easy!

—Sondra McPoland (TX), community coordinator

Valentyna (FLEX, Ukraine) and Ivanna (FLEX, Ukraine) stand in awe at the base of the Saturn V rocket.

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Halfway Point Reflections

I have had an amazing five months here in the U.S. I did so many things for the first time—kayaking, canoeing, and wall climbing. I learned to speak confidently, to debate, and gained leadership skills. Giving presentations about Pakistan in 32 different classes to almost 600 students, I didn't only teach about Pakistan but also learned how open people are, how we can make a difference, and how exchange programs are so essential for intracultural understanding. By participating in Model Legislature and Model Assembly, I had firsthand experience of real democracy, and I am inspired by how young adults learn democratic principles. Overall, it has been a great ride with its ups and downs, and it is helping me become a better person.

—Usman (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Rothering family (MN)

Usman in deep thought during a meeting of the Winona Model Legislature

Diversity in the Heartland

The 22 PAX students who traveled to Milwaukee for the 80th annual Holiday International Folk Fair learned about the different ethnic groups that settled in Wisconsin and who continue to be a significant part of Milwaukee. The kids tried many different foods, learned about handicrafts that are still practiced, watched presentations, and even joined in with some of the dancing.

—Marie Lackore (WI), community coordinator

This bunch—(seated) Nour (YES, Lebanon), Nicole (YES, Palestine), Dinah (YES, Mozambique), Ariba (YES, Pakistan), and (standing) Prina (YES, Macedonia) and Shanza (YES, Pakistan)—learned about diversity in one corner of America.

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The Adjustment Cycle

Embracing Everything New

When you have a wonderful host family who cares about you and gives you everything you need, being an exchange student becomes one of the best experiences in your life. I've learned many new things like skiing, sledding, and tubing. I've made good friends at school too. For Thanksgiving we went to IL, where I met new people. It was the same excitement on Christmas and New Year's with the ball drop—a new year full of surprises.

—Thierry (YES, Mali), hosted by the Wever family (WI)

Thierry (the tallest Christmas tree shopper) with fellow exchange students and host families

Marianna now understands why dogs are considered to be "man's best friend."

Facing Her Fears

One of my biggest achievements during my exchange year has been overcoming my fear of dogs. I can't imagine what I am going to do without our dog, Pretty Girl, when I go back to my home country. She is indeed very pretty and sweet.

If not for my host mom, dad, brothers, and sister, I would never be able to overcome my fear! I am so grateful to them for helping me. I know that a lot of exchange students have the same fear that I had, and I would like to advise them not to be afraid. Try to overcome your fear—go for it—this is the right time in your life when you have to change yourself and become better, stronger, and self-confident.

—Marianna (FLEX, Armenia), hosted by the Reeder family (PA)

A Busy Holiday Break

I knew my Christmas holidays were going to be different, but I never thought about something like this. On Christmas Day, we noticed that the river was high, but we did not worry about it since it was still within normal limits. But it kept getting higher in the next few days, and the forecast was saying that it was going to be worse than the 1993 flood.

My host family and I worked on putting down sandbags on the levees; it was hard work for a few days, but I knew it was worth it. Finally, after New Year's, the river started going down.

—Stefano (Italy), hosted by the Ellet family (IL)

Stefano takes a break from sandbagging a levee.

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As Seen in Social Media

Click on any image to view full post or watch video

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.) at paxpress@pax.org.

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