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There is Humanity in the World!

All over the world, people of all generations talk every day about global and local problems. What kinds of things have people done to solve them? There are still wars because of territorial problems between countries, religious beliefs, and ideas of becoming more powerful. Where can we see humanity? I saw it in Baltimore.

Participating in the Better Understanding for a Better World Conference (BUBW) gave me an opportunity to learn more about the world today, multiple issues facing future generations, global citizenship, communication, networking, religions, cultures, and my role as a future leader. Founder Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat and his team created an amazing atmosphere for citizens from all over the world to participate in this conference of "humanity."

We had wonderful sessions by a priest, rabbi, and two imams, who showed us that the three religions call for peace, love, and mercy. Students confirmed this by their presentations, dances, songs, poems, and performances. It was extremely hard to part with my BUBW family. There is humanity in the world! A new generation has the power not just to talk about current issues but solve them and create a better world.

—Eldos (FLEX, Kyrgyzstan), hosted by the Whittaker family (OH)

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Eldos takes time out from the busy Baltimore conference to pose for a photo.

Better Understanding for a Better World

Sponsored Students Learn Important Lessons in Baltimore

As a prize for winning the PAX virtual exchange contest (more on that in an upcoming special issue of *PAX Press*), more than a dozen PAX exchange students attended the five-day, Better Understanding for a Better World Conference in Baltimore. They were joined by students from 32 nations.

Highly interesting, the conference has several purposes. Talks and field visits serve to facilitate mutual understanding and appreciation between students from diverse regional, economic, social, religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Discussions focus on stereotypes about the "other" and their impact. Students learn about and discuss the practice of religion and faith in a pluralistic society with the objective of promoting tolerance, mutual respect, and an awareness of common values.

The content also introduces various aspects of leadership, including those involving business and entrepreneurship. Finally, the week works to forge ties of friendship between American high school students and students from around the world.

Participating PAX students—all FLEX or YES scholars—include Alisa (Ukraine), Anastasiia S. (Ukraine), Anna Ka. (Ukraine), Eldos (Kyrgyzstan), Fatima (Pakistan), Widi (Indonesia), Julia (Moldova), Kadambari (India), Rada (Bulgaria), Salma (Egypt), Saltanat (Kyrgyzstan), Sledja (Albania), and Zahratul (Indonesia).

(Top) In addition to Judaism (pictured), participants also explored Christianity and Islam during their time in Baltimore.

(Bottom) Students performed traditional dances during the conference—everyone was quick to join in!

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Goodbye USA

Nine of Ten "Top Teens" Say Goodbye

On my recent field trip to Alabama, I had the privilege of once again meeting a very special cluster of exchange students in addition to host families and school officials. To cap off the trip and the students' year, we found the perfect backdrop (see picture) at a local park, where we held our farewell party. Each student spoke about his or her experiences. There were lots of tears and moving moments about how much the year has meant. It was all so lovely and touching.

—Peggy Jackson, senior regional director

Find the final six videos in the *Ten Top Teens* series throughout this issue.

Yousaf will never forget the year he shared his native Pakistan with America.

My Story

The question that each and every single exchange student comes across during their life after their exchange years is, "What did you learn from it?" I used to ask myself, "What am I going to gain from it?" and "Is it just going to be a year-long vacation?" Back then, I had no answers, but ask me now, and I wouldn't hesitate to do it all over again, even if it meant reliving some very hard moments.

My exchange year has changed me as a person. It has taught me that the world is a huge place and the real meaning of diversity. It showed me how to look at life with a completely different perspective, and it gave me an opportunity to tell the world a story—my story. This video is a small tribute to my host family, school, community, teacher, friends, and others who helped make my experience the best one I have ever had in my life.

—Yousaf (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Staff family (WI)

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Game Show Star

Aimmy (Thailand, 2015/16) was part of an English language competition between universities in Thailand. Representing her university in this video, Aimmy's team competes in the final round—all answers had to be in English. Aimmy seems to answer all the questions for her team—no surprise to me!

—Laurel Paul (UT), community coordinator

Thai television doesn't shy away from color or graphics.

Once Exchange, Forever Exchange!

It has been exactly a year since I left my home and, at the same time, came home. It's unbelievable how fast this year has flown! As an alumna, I would like to share my appreciation to every single person who worked and continues to work so hard to make all of our impossible and ambitious American dreams come true.

Reflecting on my exchange year, I can undoubtedly say that the year in the USA has pushed me (and hopefully other alumni) to move forward. That year fired a spark in me. Thanks to my exchange experience, I have been active in my community throughout the past year, engaging myself in different NGOs, teaching English, and even becoming a delegate-representative for the international session of the European Youth Parliament. To all the upcoming alumni who are worried that their year is coming to its end, I say do not worry—real life starts only after the exchange experience.

—Svitlana (FLEX 2015/16, Ukraine), hosted by the Schaller family (OH)

Svitlana puts her exchange experience to good use on the Employment and Social Affairs committee during the European Youth Parliament's 84th International Session.

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Maman and the Girl Scouts show off different ways a headscarf is worn in Senegal.

Sharing Fashions from Around the Globe

Maman decided to share her leadership project with a Girl Scout troop of ten-year-olds. Maman wants to be a fashion designer, and she thought the girls would like to learn about clothing that girls wear in her native Senegal. Her presentation showed clothing worn by family members, including traditional casual wear and attire for important holidays. Maman showed a pink scarf and matching ankle length skirt and top as well as a lavender outfit.

Each student then received a long piece of cotton fabric. First they watched Maman put on her headscarf, and then she demonstrated some variations of scarf tying, which led to the girls each tying their own scarves. Next, they were given an elastic and a variety of beads to choose from to create necklaces. They were proud to have learned about a West African style of head wear and loved taking home the scarves and necklaces.

—Mimi Sanders (OR), community coordinator

Cristian had a standout year in the Lone Star State, by any metric.

Forever in Our Hearts

In August, we went to the airport in Houston to meet Cristian, a stranger from Romania. By the time we stopped for lunch, it was clear that he was no longer a stranger. Instead, we discovered a perfect fit for our family.

What we didn't know when he started at Magnolia High School was that "Chris" was an outstanding academic student, artist, musician, and actor. Two of his pencil drawings went to the state level; he had several guitar solos during jazz band concerts, and had parts in two major school plays. In addition, Chris never missed an opportunity to volunteer his time or talent—serving each Sunday in the children's ministry, spending time with residents of nursing homes, and helping other students with class work. Although our time together in Texas is coming to an end, we'll always have a son, big brother, grandson, and cousin living in Romania. Chris came to stay Deep in the Heart of Texas but will leave Deep in the Heart of anyone who was lucky enough to know him.

—Khristi Ward (TX), host mom of Cristian (FLEX, Romania)

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Unexpected Blessing

Javier came to live with us in October after his original host family couldn't host anymore. At first, I wasn't sure hosting was right for us. But as I talk with him now, both of us in tears as we realize that he'll be going home soon, I've come to realize how much I love him as my own.

During the year, Javier has tried crew, which he had never done. Not only did he excel at it, his team was listed as the fastest novice team in the state of New Jersey and has won three medals.

I'm so happy that we decided to host. My boys (age eight and five) love him as a brother and will miss him. When I asked them if they wanted to host again, they quickly responded, "Yes!" We are now hosting for the summer and again for the school year. Thank you, PAX, for bringing Javier into our lives and the experience of a lifetime. We love you, Javier!

—Venus Hernandez (NJ), host mom of Javier (Spain)

Javier shows off his rowing medals.

Zheng Feng's host mom Mary loves her uniquely-decorated Mother's Day gift!

A Mother's Day Like No Other

This Mother's Day was unique for me because I celebrated in a new country and environment. Three days before Mother's Day, the National Art Honor Society of my school organized an event that focused on painting terracotta planters for mothers. After painting my planter, I planted a flower provided by the teachers. Since I'm from Malaysia, I wrote the words "mom" and "Happy Mother's Day" in four different languages on the planter. In addition to writing in English, I also wrote in Chinese, Tamil, and Malay which represented the diversity and unity of my country.

—Zheng Feng (YES, Malaysia), hosted by the McGrattan family (CT)

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Milica and host mom Amy pause in a sunflower field, which are plentiful in Kansas.

Farewell for Now, Mom

Since the first day I came to my host family, I have felt such a connection with my host mom. We created a strong bond between us, which has lasted. I appreciate her so much in my life, and she is so inspiring. My mom is always there when I need advice, when I want to laugh or cry, or when we just spend time relaxing and watching a movie. Her heart is so loving and beautiful; I want to be a mom like her one day. No matter where I live tomorrow or where the future takes me, she is always going to be my mom, and I am always going to love her unconditionally.

—Milica (FLEX, Montenegro), hosted by the Morbeck family (KS)

Amazing Journey

My wife had always wanted to host a foreign exchange student, but the idea always seemed so…foreign. We had discussed the idea of hosting but had reservations. What did we know about hosting a student from a faraway land, from a culture of which we didn't have a clue? We took the plunge. Our talented young lady arrived with a big smile. Zhanaiym (Janai) was her name, and she was funny, soft-spoken, thoughtful, cultured, and smart.

At first, we worried she might not feel at home. We remember the first time she went to grab something from the refrigerator on her own, and how it put our hearts at ease. From then on, we were front and center at choir and theatre performances, cultural events, and volunteer projects.

Time flies. Goodbye day arrived. At the airport, tears were shed and in the days that followed, we realized that hosting Janai had enriched our hearts, minds, and our spirits, leaving us with hope in a mad world. We think of her often, and when guests visit, they will stay in a room now called the "Janai Room."

—Carl Sharp (AL), host dad of Zhanaiym (FLEX, Kyrgyzstan)

Janai (center): already very missed

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As Seen in Social Media

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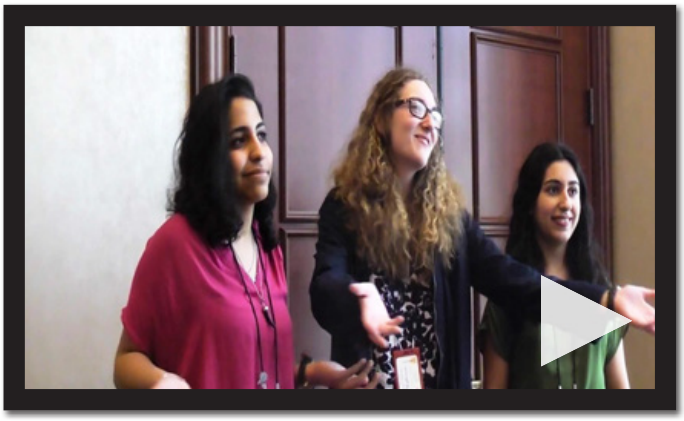

Complete Series

Highlights

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