March 2014 Vol. XIX, No. 2

Pax academic exchange

PAX PRESS

The Newspaper for Exchange Students, Host Families, and Schools

What Did We Expect?

"...You feel a little older than you were before / You've grown up, you've learned, and you still want more / Learning and teaching / Exploring and reaching / To break stupid borders and make little wonders / To see how this world is becoming so small / When language is no longer important at all!..."

View Tatyana's (Turkmenistan) full sketch and poem.

Inside this Issue

Exchange Living 2-3

Get Involved! 4

PAX Plus 5

The Adjustment Cycle 6

On the Home Front 7

As Seen in Social Media 8

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There's No Place Like Home

Of their many life-changing experiences, exchange students learn to think of someplace other than their native country as "home." For Baty (YES, Kuwait), Little River, Kansas, is her current home, and the Porters are her family. A gifted musician, Baty expressed her definition of home in a gorgeous original song that she composed and performed. *PAX Press* asked her to share her thoughts.

PAX Press: *Thank you for sharing your original song and music video "Home" with us as part of the PAX student contest #3, "Beating the Winter Blues." It must have been quite emotional for you while working on this project. Tell us a little bit about the process.*

Baty: "To be honest, it wasn't very organized. I was about to go to sleep and the idea of the song struck me. I could see everything in my head, even the video. I couldn't go to sleep before jotting it down on paper. So I woke in the morning and looked at the song, and I thought, 'This could be something good.'"

PAX Press: *Have you had the opportunity to perform your music while here in the US?*

Baty: "Oh yeah, more than ever! My host family is quite musical. That mutual interest was a great common ground for us from day one. And I've always loved being on stage, and I never really got to do a lot of that in Kuwait with people who hadn't heard me perform."

PAX Press: *For many Americans, a young woman wearing a hijab is a foreign sight. At the same time, this is a style of music to which nearly all Americans can relate, and you perform like an absolute star. Have you found that it's been an unexpected combination for Americans—the hijab and your guitar?*

Baty: "My hijab has never hindered anything I do. In fact, it pushed me forward and encouraged me to be stronger in everything I do. And I believe that getting my voice out there helps people understand that. I've always been quite atypical, even in Kuwait. So once you get to know me, my hijab/guitar combination is not the weirdest thing I do, trust me on that!

Read the full interview along with the lyrics to "Home."

First Encounters Across the Pond

My experience as a FLEX exchange student began with meeting my host family in the airport. The only unique thing in my case was that I first met my American parents in Moscow, Russia, two months before I arrived in America. Vice versa, huh? But let's start from the very beginning.

I was informed of my placement very early, and I quickly found out that my host parents were visiting Russia in June of 2013. The purpose of their visit was to meet their first exchange student's family and do a sightseeing tour in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Petrozavodsk (the hometown of Ana, their first exchange daughter). I personally live in Moscow, so they couldn't skip over visiting my family and me as well. There was no way I'd let anybody guide them in my home city! The hotels and tickets were booked in advance, and I was ready to host my American family in Moscow, and Ana was the boss in St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk

Host mother Mary, Elizaveta, and host father Steven in Moscow

The time spent with my host family in Russia was unforgettable. Besides visiting tourist attractions, our families became good friends. Fortunately, the tourists enjoyed Russia and the time with their Russian exchange relatives.

So that's how I hosted my host parents before they actually hosted me. When every exchange student was worried about meeting their family in America, I already knew I was going to spend my year with my faithful friends! I strongly recommend the host families visiting their students' home countries. I've heard exchange students are the best tour guides!

—Elizaveta (FLEX, Russia), hosted by the Cadwell family (LA)

Surprise! It's Your Birthday!

Amanda from Sweden recently turned 18, so we wanted to do something special for her. On Saturday morning, she, host sister (and my daughter) Kinsey, American friend Caitlin, and two other exchange students were set to spend the day shopping in Wilmington, NC.

We headed in that direction while playing a movie in the car to keep Amanda occupied. As we got closer to the South Carolina border, I noticed Amanda looking out the window, wondering where we were. She never said a word to me or asked any questions. Then I pulled over to the South Carolina sign and revealed the surprise and that we were all a part of it. She burst into tears and was so surprised and excited. She had never been to Myrtle Beach or South Carolina, but it was somewhere she really wanted to go. Amanda told us that back home, a birthday was just like any other day and that this was the first big birthday event she had ever had.

It was so much fun surprising her and making her dream of having a birthday at the beach a reality. We had a blast! We had so many other surprises that weekend, and I know it will be a birthday she will never forget. It makes me so happy as a host parent and PAX coordinator when I continue to make exchange students' dreams come true, even after coming to the USA.

—Janet Mooneyhan (NC), PAX community coordinator and host mom of Amanda (Sweden)

Crossing the border into South Carolina are (left to right) Janice (Germany), Chiara (Italy), Amanda (Sweden), host sister Kinsey, and friend Caitlin.

Back to Front Page

Let it Snow, Snow, SNOW!

This exchange year has been pretty magnificent and remarkable since I first arrived. The days went passing through, and then I faced an unexpected weather (winter) situation that I can't easily forget in my life.

I have never lived in an environment with that kind of cold. In my home country the temperature is usually in the 70s or 80s Fahrenheit, but now I had to face a dramatic change—20 degrees and sometimes it gets below zero. It wasn't that hard to adapt to this new weather because of my host parents. They do everything to protect me and keep me warm so that I don't get sick. Though I was kinda not used to wearing heavy coats and sweaters, I had to wear them. I tried once going to school with my sandals, and it was freezing so bad, I couldn't feel my feet. From there onwards, a lesson was learned in life that I should dress warm during the wintertime.

I can say I was like a little baby for a while because every time I would want to go hang out, my host mom and dad would always make sure I had a heavy coat with me. I had a lot of fun this winter, and my host parents decided to take me snow tubing for the first time in my whole life. I never knew playing in the snow was that fun, and after all, I was so excited, because that was my first time to see the snow. Everyone in my family was so excited for me.

—Catherine (YES, Tanzania) hosted by the Shinabery family (VA)

Catherine of Tanzania experiences snow for the first time in Berryville, VA.

Andrea (front left) with the Bryant family (Carol, Forrest, Forrest Jr., and Ava)

More Alike than Different

My name is Andrea, and I'm a student ambassador from Barcelona, Spain living in the State of Alabama. I have Celiac disease, which means that I have to eat completely gluten-free. The truth is, I was a little concerned about it before coming here. I knew that this was a challenge with which I would have to deal. Fortunately, I have had very few problems with it! I did not know that here lots of people know about it, and actually many others also eat gluten-free too! My host sister has Celiac disease, and other family members are gluten intolerant, so the whole family eats gluten-free. This helps me so much in my experience, because I do not have to worry at all about the food when we were at home!

There are many restaurants with gluten-free menus, gluten-free bakeries, and the supermarkets have lots of gluten-free items too! Going out to eat with friends has never been so easy!

This has been such a great experience, not only for the English, but for all the great friends and people I have met and for all the culture I have learned. This year has passed by so fast! I will never forget such a great experience!

—Andrea (Spain), hosted by the Bryant family (AL)

An Indonesian's Winter in New England

Febri from Indonesia and her host family share some good old-fashioned wintertime fun in New England. Highlights include time-honored traditions such as sipping hot cocoa coupled with new twists, especially as they relate to snowman-building!

It's impossible to have the "winter blues" when watching this video.

—Febriani (YES, Indonesia), hosted by the Dawson family (MA)

Back to Front Page

Get Involved!

Nino (Georgia) takes third place at Beta Club Convention.

Never Give Up!

On March 7-8, I went to the National BETA Club Convention to compete in an Oratory Contest. The truth is I was not self-confident at all. I thought that I had no chance to win because I was competing against 28 students from across the state of Missouri. I thought that because of my accent and pronunciation, I wouldn't be able to win; but I was wrong. Yes, you are right, I won! This shy girl, who was even scared to stand in front of her classmates, went to the USA and received third place in the Missouri Oratory Contest

The reason why I'm writing is to tell you not to give up on yourself, never ever give up on your dreams. Even though I wasn't confident at all and was thinking that I wouldn't be able to win, I never gave up. I was working hard , practicing, and praying to God to help me. I knew that all I had to do was to do my best, give 100%.

Go ahead, fight for your goals and remember: "The greatest accomplishment is not in ever falling, but in rising again after you fall."

—Nino (FLEX, Georgia), hosted by the Nelson family (MO)

Most Valuable Player

Nuttanicha, aka Ii-Chien, completed her first season of flag football for the Bonanza High School Bengals and was awarded with the MVP Award for the JV team. She led the defense with 95 tackles and two interceptions—one for a touchdown! Ii-Chien also played running back on offense and scored another TD there. She had a blast playing and made many new friends. Next up: track and field! Go Ii-Chien!

—Margaret Hoppe (NV), PAX community coordinator

Nuttanicha (Thailand), picking up a few yards

Haroun (right) with teammate Mark Bills in the wrestling room

There is No "I" in "Teamwork"

"Teamwork is an individual commitment to team effort." These are my coach's words.

Even though wrestling looks a lot like an individual sport, teamwork is its base, pushing each other through practice and pain and supporting each other during matches.

The season was great. I won a lot of matches, and the ones I lost are the reason I won the next ones. I got second in a tournament and got a medal. A "wrestler"—that's who I am, and that's why I'm fighting to enjoy and use every opportunity my exchange year provides me.

—Haroun (YES, Tunisia), hosted by the Spadafora family (UT)

Back to Front Page

Having Fun While Supporting a Cause

Left to right: Marta (Spain), Kristina (Slovakia), Caio (Brazil), YunKyung (Korea), Nuttanicha (Thailand), Johanna (Germany), Alina (Germany), and Jan (Germany) support breast cancer research.

Eight students from our Southern Nevada PAX group recently went to San Diego for a long weekend together with host families Walker and Piccini. We had a great time walking on the beach, going to SeaWorld, relaxing in the hotel whirlpool and taking "selfies" everywhere.

But the most memorable part of the trip was helping at the Avon Breast Cancer Walk. We got up very early in the morning on Friday to see the opening ceremony and help with the IDs for the walkers. The next day, we went to one of the stations that the walkers came by to cheer them on, and we visited their camp at night. It was a lot of fun, especially because we were wearing self-made tutus and fairy wings, and we were covered with cupcake stickers that we gave to the walkers. It was great to meet all those people who help fight against breast cancer, and we all enjoyed our San Diego experience!

—Johanna (Germany), hosted by the Piccini family (NV)

We Do Care for the Environment!

When trying to complete my 100 volunteering hours (which are for the Presidential Award), my family came up with such a great idea: Adopt a Highway, and of course, clean it.

We were planning this for months, and finally we got there. My family and I adopted two miles of highway in El Paso, TX. When you think of it, maybe it sounds like an easy task, like I thought before I got there. But actually when you do it, I think you would change your thought.

I didn't know that there would be a lot of trash. However, we went early in the morning, and we kept cleaning until night. It was really hot; we started sweating, and plus the trash was all over the place. I can say that we are hard workers. We got 14 big trash baskets full of trash. We were equipped with gloves and pickers, and for our safety, we wore "safety jackets."

We got a sign with our names on it. I was really surprised and at the same time happy. Isn't it cool, me on a sign and everybody could see? Of course it is, I felt really famous, I have to admit!

After spending all that time cleaning, we were dead tired, and while we were driving home, all of us were planning to have a shower and go to bed, but that didn't happen. We played cards, laughed, and had even more fun.

I have to clean the highway two more times. Of course, my host family is always by my side, so all of us will do it again. I am really thankful for having such a great family, and yes, we do want America CLEAN.

—Lebishka (YES, Macedonia), hosted by the Sukon family (TX)

Host sister Celina, Lebishka, and host mom Ceila under their own Adopt a Highway sign in El Paso, TX

Back to Front Page

Cross-Cultural Expert on Friendship

Students, reflect back since you first arrived. What have you learned about Americans? Have you made friends? How does being a friend in your country contrast to the U.S.?

In your orientations, your coordinators emphasized the importance of getting involved and keeping "busy." This is a common value for Americans. As a result, the verb "to do" is used more than any other. Have you heard Americans say, "How are you doing?" On Friday, they may ask, "What are you doing this weekend?" When you come back to school on Monday, the question is, "What did you do over the weekend?" If you answer "Nothing," then there might be concern expressed followed by, "Why? What's wrong?"

Many Americans are used to changes in their lives, their homes, communities, and schools. Americans learn to make friends quickly and have different types of friends: friends at school, friends where I live, friends from elementary school, friends from sports teams, etc. Americans may describe friends differently: "a friend," "childhood friend," "good friend," "boyfriend/girlfriend," "a friend from church," "friend of the family," and of course, "BFF" (best friends forever).

YES students, have you learned to take the first step and follow up to make friends? It is okay to ask what some students are doing over the weekend and if you may join. Something as simple as an in-class comment, "I had trouble with problem 36. My answer was X. What did you get?" or "Did you have a good weekend? Breaking the ice, speaking up, and asking for what you want is consistent with the American value of independence, self-initiative, and self-reliance.

Remember, the friends from back home and the friends you make here are important. Some may be temporary, but others may last a lifetime. Keep the courage to get involved in new activities and the friendships will grow.

Share your tip of how you made friends to tell future YES students arriving in August. You only have three months to go, so as Americans say, "Make the most of it!"

—Lobna Ismail, president
www.connecting-cultures.net

A Leap of Faith Takes Trust

Exchange year for me is learning to trust. Trust people who at first are only names on a piece of paper, trust that they want the best for you—that they care. Trust that you have the strength to endure a year on your own of being apart from everything that mattered to you before. Trust that you will have friends. Trust that everything's going to be alright. And it is seeing this trust being justified.

My trust is on a beautiful track so far. For the first time in forever I've done a lot of things that give me an enthusiastic feeling to do more new things, especially learning about other countries' cultures and lifestyles. And I am still working on it. A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the souls of its people. It's easy enough to win over people you meet, but getting strangers to love you…now, that's the trick. And earning, or I should say winning, the love of my host family is a most winsome thing I've done so far.

Shadab (YES, India), hosted by the Fuhrman family (NY)

Shadab visits the Big Apple.

Back to Front Page

Fadel and host brother Damon inspect dinosaur footprints outside of Tuba City, AZ.

Finding Cultural Variety in Unexpected Places

When Fadel of Lebanon joined our family shortly after we moved from the Phoenix area to Flagstaff, we knew we were in for a rewarding experience. We began to feel very much at home with each other in no time at all. And we began to learn about each other's cultures in the course of talking about school work or just everyday conversation.

Last October, the four of us—Tom and Cynthia, our son Damon, and Fadel—drove to Tuba City, the largest community in the Navajo Nation, about 80 miles northeast of Flagstaff. We'd been invited to participate in the annual Navajo Fair and Parade. Except for Cynthia, none of us had ever been here before. We were warmed by the friendliness of the parade spectators and participants, and fascinated by the Navajo art, food, customs, and ceremonies on display at the fair. None of us speak the Navajo language, but it was fascinating to hear the people all around us speaking a tongue that's existed on this continent for so many centuries, but so seldom heard outside the Navajo community.

We got to talking about it among ourselves after witnessing part of a day-long Navajo dance ceremony, which some of the spectators were kind enough to try to explain to us in English. At that point, only a few hours from our home, we felt like visitors to a friendly but foreign country. Fadel too commented that he felt like he was in a different nation—which, of course, we were.

It was an unforgettable experience, to share a common sense of discovery with our exchange student. We all came home with a sense that differences between cultures are the norm, not the exception, and that those differences should be approached in a spirit of friendly curiosity. Our time with Fadel has taught us so much.

—Cynthia Seelhammer (AZ), host mom of Fadel (YES, Lebanon)

Double Duty, Double Rewards

After I enjoyed having Joscha for the first five months of his 10-month stay, I was delighted to be able to have Tom from Australia join us for five months. They have become good friends and share one another's customs in addition to learning about life in Maine. The picture shows the boys at a German restaurant where Tom is eating one of the German meals that Joscha described. Joscha enjoyed the restaurant's adjacent shop, where many of the food items for sale were written in German.

Joscha wants to be a doctor and has had some wonderful experiences at a local hospital. He joined the Patient and Staff Committee of which I am a member. He asks questions and offers his ideas. The hospital has arranged for him to observe some operations, including the removal of two bone spurs from my foot. Most if not all of the doctors delighted to have the opportunity to share information about their specialty.

—Eunice Spooner (ME), host mom of Joscha (Germany) and Tom (Australia)

Back to Front Page

As Seen in Social Media

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PAX Press is published monthly by
PAX – Program of Academic Exchange
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800.555.6211
www.pax.org

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Back to Front Page