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Ten Top Teens

Staff, community coordinators, and guests in attendance at the 22nd annual PAX National Meeting in Austin late last month had a chance to get to know 10 very special teens: nine self-stylized "student ambassadors" and one guitar-wielding Alabama host sister.

Attendees were both charmed and captivated in equal measure by the FLEX and YES students, whose variety show had the crowd on their feet with excitement. *PAX Press* caught up with community coordinator Rebecca Kinney's Alabama cohort on the sidelines of the meeting and is very excited to present them to you. Click on any play symbol for the first looks at an unfolding series known as *Ten Top Teens*. This installment's featured students are Reem (YES, Egypt) and Giorgi (FLEX, Georgia).

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Julia from Moldova

TWO GREAT HONORS

Miss Southwood High School

My story started when my school counselor advised me to participate in the "Miss Southwood Scholarship Pageant." Beauty pageant in America? It was beyond my dreams! However, I decided to try. I was both nervous and happy on the pageant day.

The judges were impressed by my interview and the fact that I was an exchange student, can speak four languages, and also that I sing. I presented my country, focusing on the culture and its people. I also noted that a beauty pageant is not just about how you look but also your personality and what you stand for. That's why I think I received "Best Interview." Participants presented themselves and modeled different outfits. I introduced myself in Russian and then translated into English. The audience applauded.

When the winners were announced, I remember standing on stage—already happy just for participating—when I heard my name called. My friends went nuts, and my host parents looked at me with such pride! What else can a girl dream for at 17? As a prize, I received a $500 education scholarship.

"Miss Southwood 2017" was an amazing experience in my American year that shows the importance of being proud of who you are and believing in yourself.

Senior Achiever

My journey with the Junior Achievement (JA) SPARK Entrepreneurial and Innovation Challenge began in November when a professor gave a lecture on entrepreneurial and marketing strategies at school. The presentations were awesome, and I learned a lot about business. Ultimately, I was given the task to create a business idea. After many months of hard work and research, my business idea ("MediMac") was developed. It was a wonderful and challenging experience, but after many hours of preparation, I was ready to pitch on March 9 along with 11 other teams.

JA is a great program, because it helps young entrepreneurs develop unique ideas in which they can believe. JA helped me realize that everything is possible and that the sky is the limit. I know this victory would not happen without the great support of my American parents, Steve and Mary Cadwell, my natural parents and teachers, and all JA teams.

This has been one of the best experiences in my life. I am so happy to be the winner of JA in North Louisiana and to receive a $5,000 scholarship and $2,500 for my school. I am so excited to represent North Louisiana at the state competition in New Orleans on March 24. Wish me luck!

—Julia (FLEX, Moldova), hosted by the Cadwells (LA)

Julia poses with Mr. Southwood, Emmanuel Bass.

Julia is presented with a big check for her big achievement.

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Get Involved!

Ensuring Justice is Served

Cristian (third from right) and his mock trial teammates at the State Capitol building.

At a Teen L.I.F.E. (Leadership, Inspiration, Fellowship, Education) meeting at the local YMCA, we were asked to choose what area we wanted to get involved in. I selected "Youth and Government" without really knowing what it was about. Some of the other teens in this group already had experience with it. They told me that we would do mock trials, which are a combination of the U.S. judicial system and theatre, all run by teens.

Our team received a real-life court case from the YMCA, and we chose which roles we wanted to play—attorney or witness. We also had to prepare for both the prosecution and defense and eventually competed against other teams. I played two witnesses, one for the prosecution and one for the defense. Our team came in second place in the district, which earned us the opportunity to participate at the state level during a three-day event held at the State Capitol building in Austin, Texas. The Mock Trial program was a realistic and fun method of learning about the U.S. judicial system.

—Cristian (FLEX, Romania), hosted by the Ward family (TX)

Cold Blades, Warm Hearts

Alicia from Spain and Emma from France have been having an enjoyable winter as members of the National Blades Synchronized Ice Skating team, which is based in Dale City, VA, where the girls attend C.D. Hylton High School.

The coaches picked the theme for this season's program as "World Unity, The World Is Ours." This made it very fitting that both girls were able to skate with 14 of their American teammates!

They began practicing in August and competed with the team between November and February in Michigan, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, earning a pewter and a bronze medal over the five competitions.

The entire team agrees it has been an amazing experience sharing synchronized skating together in the United States. Alicia and Emma will be missed next season!

—Teresa Yuengert (VA),
host mom of Alicia (Spain)

Emma (left) and Alicia (right) flank American teammate Katie Frankel, sporting their bronze medals earned in Hershey, PA.

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Get Involved!

Mariya (FLEX, Ukraine), Anna (FLEX, Ukraine), Adel (FLEX, Kazakhstan), Anastasiya, and Tatev (FLEX, Armenia) are united at an American parade.

A Capital Time

On February 20, I had the privilege of seeing a Presidents' Day parade with my own eyes! Capital Club, which unites exchange students living in the Washington D.C. area, organized our trip to Alexandria, VA, where we experienced a real American parade and learned historical facts. We had an opportunity to walk and sit in the church that George Washington attended! That was unbelievable, realizing that more than 200 years ago, the first President of the United States had sat in the same place!

And of course, we also had lots of fun talking to other exchange students, sharing new experiences, recalling funny memories, and creating new goals. Maybe that's one of the characteristics of exchange year—making new friends every single day!

—Anastasiya (FLEX, Ukraine), hosted by the Shank family (VA)

Good as Gold

New Philadelphia High School's "Italian Stallion" delivered a pair of state championships. Sem, a junior foreign exchange student from Italy, claimed the Division II boys 50 freestyle title and followed that with a 100 freestyle crown at the 2017 Ohio High School Swimming & Diving Championship held in the C.T. Branin Natatorum on the campus of McKinley High School.

Sem won the 50 title with a blazing time of 20.16 seconds and claimed the 100 in 44.59. He is the first state champion for New Philadelphia since the Quakers won the 1940 boys state basketball championship.

Sem is hosted by Len and Faye Stingel who cheered him to victory together with community coordinator Ryan Dunfee.

—Excerpted in part from an article by Roger Metzger, Times Reporter sports writer

Sem celebrates one of two state championships!

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The Facebook post announces Yousaf's TV interview.

Reaching a Broader Audience

I got an opportunity to give a TV interview that ran live in my home country of Pakistan. Twelve thousand people saw it on Facebook alone, and thousands of Pakistanis watched me on TV, where I talked about my amazing experiences as an exchange student, and my loving host community and family. I told Pakistan how generous America is, and I begged young people to take this ride after this breathtaking experience of mine. I told them to get a passport and have their minds blown away, find new people, and learn lessons they'll never get out of a book.

Doing all this made me feel really patriotic and satisfied, because I realized that I was doing my job as an ambassador, and I think this is the true meaning of being an exchange student. I am just a 17-year-old, and now I have impacted the lives of thousands of people both in Pakistan and America. This is all because I am an exchange student.

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

The Groundhog Said What?

It was the 2nd of February—Groundhog Day! Waking up at 2:30 a.m. to go to Gobbler's Knob in Punxsutawney, PA, I was so elated and excited! A crowd of almost 15,000 people gathered there, awaiting the emergence of Punxsutawney Phil. The groundhog emerged from his burrow after sunrise. As the tradition goes, Phil then looks for his shadow. This was the 131st official Groundhog Day, and Punxsutawney Phil predicted six more weeks of winter!

—Kah (YES, Malaysia),
hosted by the Karlie family (PA)

Along with host family members and friends, Kah (second from right) is all smiles despite Punxsutawney Phil's chilly forecast!

Fatma prepares her 1,000 messages of love!

Love for All

I noticed that Valentine's Day is not always the happiest day for everyone. Some people feel sad and unloved on this day, so I decided to work on a project that I called "1,000 Smiles on Valentine's Day." I gathered some volunteers, and we made 1,000 cards with positive love notes and pinned a flower or a lollipop to them and gave them to people at nursing homes, hospitals, doctors' offices, and military bases and then to others in the community. We even had a local TV station record the event for us. It went perfectly. All those sick or sad people that we handed gifts to smiled, looked at me, and said "Thank you, sweet lady, you just made my day!" I was so excited, because I was able to draw 1,000 smiles in one day!

—Fatma (YES, Tunisia)
hosted by the Stokes family (AL)

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Cluster Fun

Partaking in the Polar Plunge

Earlier this month, several exchange students from North Crawford High School participated in a charity event for the Special Olympics—the Polar Plunge in La Crosse, WI.

Not only were outside temperatures right about at the freezing mark, but then the participants raced into the freezing water of the Mississippi River! Everyone warmed up afterwards and had a great time while raising lots of money for the Special Olympics.

—Jen Klekamp, community coordinator (WI)

Daniel (Ecuador), Marina (Spain), Laura (Spain), and Pierre (Belgium) run into the Mississippi River—brrr!

Fifteen Nations in One House

This is what the little trip to Chisago City, MN, looked like. In little groups, we arrived in the late afternoon. We were a little bit shy, so we didn't talk that much with each other, but after a few games to get to know each other, it was not difficult anymore to find someone to talk to. After a long night with a lot of talking, we had to get up early, and had fun ice skating, ice fishing, and having snowball fights. Wherever we went, there were always people exchanging their experiences or just talking about their country. Some of us walked on a frozen lake for the first time and most of us had never seen people driving their car on the frozen lake before. Taking many photos and talking to many people, we made amazing memories and definitely new friends.

—Jana (Germany), hosted by the McConnell-Ringen family (MN)

There's nothing like a friend to support you! Standing from left to right are Chiara (Italy), Federica (Italy), Daniela (Mexico), Suchanya (Thailand), Jana, Susanna (Italy), and Victoria (Germany). Piggybacking are Julie (France), Johanna (Germany), Africa (Spain), Laura (Germany), Wilma (Sweden), and Aurora (Spain).

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As Seen in Social Media

Click on any image to view full post or watch video

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Coordinator Honored

Dolores receives her award from Dian McCarthy, GHS School Board chair. Among PAX's first coordinators, Dolores has organized exchanges for more than 220 PAX students. (photo credit: Gary Girolimon)

Sharing Her America for Over 40 Years

Dolores Siik has coordinated foreign exchange student homestays for more than four decades, bringing hundreds of students from around the world to the Goffstown, NH, community and schools. In 1971, Dolores' family hosted their first exchange student from Japan, making room for another person in their already large family of eight. After a few years, she began coordinating short and long-term homestays through several programs, including PAX's FLEX and YES programs, to ensure that this cross-cultural opportunity continued for years to come. In Goffstown High School, flags from all over the world hang from the ceiling, representing the nationalities of students who have studied there. It looks like a mini United Nations!

On February 4, Dolores was selected as the recipient of the Dream Keeper Award from the Goffstown School Board. This award recognizes people or organizations that have gone the extra mile to make the Goffstown dream of providing a superior education a reality. As one former host family member summed it up, "Mrs. Siik is a national treasure! Thanks for making Goffstown great and broadening our understanding of the world." Congratulations, Dolores!

—Reta Chaffee (NH), host mom of Jumaira (YES, Philippines)

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