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PAX academic exchange

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The Importance of Being an Exchange Student

I spent my spring break drawing a picture that shows the importance of being an exchange student, which is not a simple thing. It's a challenge given to people to play a role in bringing peace to the world by exploring differences. Knowing people's perspectives around the world helps us realize that everyone on earth is similar even though we look different.

Look at the globe! Get closer—it's not only a globe, it's a puzzle of our earth. A puzzle is a game or a histrionic that people need to solve, but not all people are interested in solving it. Exchange students are challenged by the puzzle of our world. The black color with random flags means the neutrality or the unity of some countries to solve the puzzle of our earth.

Zahratul, artiste extraordinaire!

Do you see the only purple color? Everyone recognizes the roller coaster. As exchange students, our lives are like a roller coaster. Before we ride it, we need to be brave and take a risk during the one-year journey. Ups and downs make us more mature than we were before. The starting and ending points of the roller coaster are similar. We're from one of hundreds of countries around the world. We start from one country and then explore the world during a year. Then we go back to where we started with other feelings and lots of changes.

Under the earth, there is a book with a chain, lock, and part of the word "problem." Do you see all the words underneath—culture, habits, religions, etc.? Most people think these things are problems. In fact, they are not; they are just differences. As exchange students, it's time for us to bring peace to the main organ of our body, our brain, to unlock it and start tolerating each other and be open-minded to differences. The key is the peace that we feel in our heart which builds a connection to our brain.

From her goggles and her outfit, the person looking at the earth is clearly an adventurer. Exchange students are adventurers who experience, explore, and go to another side of the world that we aren't used to. For what? Do you see the map in her goggles? Is it the same with the puzzle of the earth? It is not! The puzzle shows the Asian, Australian, and American continents, but the goggles show the American, European, and African continents. What does it mean? It means to see people's perspectives around the world. She holds and sees one side, but she tries to see another side. This world has millions of perspectives.

Most of my art work is the sky. Is the sky similar in every country? Yes, it is the same, but we look at it from different angles and at different times. The sky is infinite, and the people who live under it have infinite ways of thinking. People look at you from different places on earth and see you differently. The sky is like us. We look different and unique from different angles, but in fact we are similar because we are human.

—Zahratul (YES, Indonesia), hosted by the Fiechter family (IN)

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PAX Means Peace Scholars

The whole gang: Naima poses with host parents Michael and Rachelle in addition to host sisters Raegan, Alisa, and Meg.

Making the Most of Everything

When I was coming to the United States, I was terrified and excited. I didn't know what to expect, but it all turned out great. It is incredibly amazing how I bonded with my family and friends in a short period of time. I would say that playing sports like basketball and tennis, and being involved with all kinds of things in school and outside of school played a big role. I am so happy that I got the chance to meet all of the new people in my life, and I will forever be grateful to everyone who took part in this life-changing experience. This year means so much for me and for my future.

—Naima (PAX Means Peace Scholar, Somaliland), hosted by the Smith family (IN)

Running and Reflecting

Spring term has been the best season in my journey so far. The ground reflects green, appealing to the eyes as the birds cozily welcome the season of their breeding. Days get longer, but that matters less when I lay down on my back, roll around, and deeply gaze at the beauty of my surroundings. Spring is a friend to neither cold nor hot.

It is in this magical season that I joined track and made it to the varsity team. It was surprising to me that I could do more than what I was expecting, competing with the best runners in the county. I had the opportunity to meet new friends each day. Every one of them had a unique personality and story. I believe the only thing that brought us all together is the desire for learning; we are all striving to learn and gain new knowledge each day.

Ultimately, it is very sad that I can count the number of days I have left in my journey. For sure, it has been a year of surprises, challenges, and learning. I acquired so many things from my friends, families, teachers, and the PAX community at large and am very grateful for the opportunity.

—Mohamed (PAX Means Peace Scholar, Somaliland), hosted by the Peckinpaugh family (IN)

Mohamed: equal parts athleticism and style

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An American Spring Break

I have enjoyed all the breaks I had for the most part, but spring break was phenomenal. I feel fortunate to have had the chance to visit all the major theme parks. Watching a live performance of *Indiana Jones* gave me insight into how movies are acted on stage. My favorite theme park was Epcot, especially the amazing architecture, representing different countries from around the world.

On our way to Florida, we spent several nights at Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia. Kayaking in the river with huge alligators in the water was fascinating. Luckily, the alligators were friendly! Two weeks felt like a week, because the vacation was so exciting. Thanks to my host family who made this possible.

—Abdirasak (PAX Means Peace Scholar, Somaliland), hosted by the Coats family (IN)

Abdirasak feels the magic at the Magic Kingdom!

Sayidcali (#22) and his JV soccer teammates

A Jam-Packed Year in Indiana

Getting involved in sports like soccer and track was an important way for Sayid to make friends since his school has more than 2,000 students—a serious departure from Abaarso School of Science and Technology back home (just over 200 students in grades 7 to 12).

Over the course of the program, his openness and warmth made him popular in his community—Coordinator and Regional Development Manager Rebekah Hubley notes that younger kids at church "flock to him like a magnet." He has also done a considerable amount to teach those around him about both his culture—one that most know little about—and his famous and innovative school in Somaliland. Look-ing back on the experience, he is extremely thankful to his host fam-ily. Their recent spring break trip to Florida with the extended family was a high point of an amazingly exciting year!

—Sayidcali (PAX Means Peace Scholar, Somaliland), hosted by the Jester family (IN)

Celebrating a Year of Firsts

I have been in the U.S. for almost seven months, and I have experienced so many things I never imagined I would even get the chance to do. I have undergone the American seasons—winter is my favorite so far, because I got to see snow for the first time in my entire life. I also encountered the American holidays, which are totally different from the holidays we have in Somaliland.

I had the chance to go to Disneyworld in Florida; it felt like I was dreaming while there! Some of the other new things I have done include: going to a real life bull ride show, kayaking, riding a horse, riding in a boat, going on a roller coaster, seeing different animals, and many other things. None of these would have happened without my host family and friends. I am so thankful for being a PAX exchange student.

—Hala (PAX Means Peace Scholar, Somaliland), hosted by the Bertsch family (IN)

Riding a horse was one of many "firsts" for Hala.

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Alumni Initiate FLEX Talks in Kyiv

On February 18, more than 130 people attended the FLEX Talks conference in Kyiv, Ukraine. It was the first conference of its kind in Kyiv, where FLEX alumni shared their success stories with active youth in the community.

The idea of this project came to Olena Kozyr (2015/16), Yuliya Tymoshenko (2015/16), and Vladyslav Klybanivskyy (2015/16) during the Eastern Europe FLEX-Ability workshop which they attended in Kvareli, Georgia last September. The workshop gave them a wide range of new technological, entrepreneurial, and creative thinking skills as well as boosting their desire to make positive changes in their communities.

"Ukraine has more than 6,000 FLEX alumni, and every one of them has a story to tell. We were always eager to organize something like TEDx for FLEX alumni, so we applied for an Eastern Europe FLEX-Ability Workshop Follow-on Project grant and received funds to hold FLEX Talks," says Olena Kozyr.

During the event, five incredible speakers shared their experiences of becoming leaders in their fields and inspired the youth involved to reach for their dreams and goals.

Roman Fishchuk from Ivano-Frankivsk (2003/04) talked about his life path—starting from spending a year in Pennsylvania to opening an innovative hearing center at the Ivano-Frankivsk National Medical University. After years of unsuccessful attempts to reform the healthcare system on a state level, he believes that real change is always brought by grassroots initiatives on the local level.

Vadym Kiyashko from Kupyansk (2007/08) introduced camp "Unity" and "I love English" schools—projects that he has been working on for the past three years. The camp and the school cultivate student leadership and English skills.

Mykola Tymkiv from Kalush (2007/08) explained what creates a perfect team and how his company Zoom Support grew from 200 employees to nearly 1,000 in two short years. In his speech, Tymkiv also emphasized the vital role of social entrepreneurship in the world.

Victoria Barbaniuk talked about the importance of being at the right place at the right time with the right people. She stepped in to represent and present on the Teach for Ukraine project, which was initiated by FLEX alumna Rimma El Dzhuveydi from Zaporizhzhya (2006/07).

Special guest speaker Pavlo Sheremeta, Ukrainian economist and former Minister of Economic Development and Trade in Ukraine, focused his speech on three key traits of a successful person: removing everything unnecessary from life, embodying a sense of danger, and embracing principles of effective communication. Pavlo believes that active young people are in charge of Ukraine's future.

"I met so many motivational people here and was really inspired by the speakers. It's time to change something in my life," says Anna Babychevska, FLEX Talks participant.

"The participants were not the only ones who learned a lot at the event! Organizers enjoyed the unique experience of preparing for the talks. This was my first experience managing and organizing a project like this. FLEX Talks motivated me. I hope it was equally encouraging for those who attended!" says Vladyslav Klybanivskyy.

Undoubtedly, the FLEX Talks have made an impact on the youth who joined the conference and taught that anything can be achieved through hard work.

—Yuliya (FLEX 2015/16, Ukraine), hosted by the Hamilton family (LA)

Yuliya, joint organizer and PAX/FLEX alumna, welcomes participants to Kyiv's first ever FLEX Talks.

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Keeping Her World Green

Every Wednesday, I have Rotary Interact Club, and I'm very glad I joined. Each week, we volunteer at different places. Sometimes, we go to an elementary school to have fun and learn with kids. We also raise money for kids in Afghanistan and Pakistan through a program called Pinkies for Polio. Another time, we decided to clear trash out of our high school to help keep our planet clean. First, you have to clean the place that surrounds you, and then go farther. I love being a part of this club, because I have a chance to help others.

—Laman (FLEX, Azerbaijan), hosted by the Schaller family (OH)

Laman (center) is happy to do her part in cleaning up her surroundings.

A Local Celebrity

The month of April has been so much fun with a lot going on. I got awesome birthday presents from my family, including tickets to Michigan's annual spring football game. Can there be a better way to enjoy spring during your exchange year?

Yes, there can—when you are interviewed by a newspaper and have your story published. Wherever I go now, people say, "Hey, what's up buddy? I know you from the newspaper. Thank you for being in our community." These comments make my day, and indeed the newspaper story made me a celebrity in the whole city. I was on the planning committee for a school event called "Celebrate Tecumseh," and all the event visitors had only one question: "Are you that exchange student from the newspaper?" I had fun with them explaining my fabulous life. I'm so thankful to my host family for making a difference by hosting us—the future peace ambassadors.

—Sushant (YES, India), hosted by the Ford family (MI)

A Life-changing Week

Can you imagine the beginning of spring in the most beautiful city in the USA? After everything that our exchange programs give us (the whole year in the USA, new experiences, and unforgettable moments), we could not ask for anything else! But the Civic Education Workshop in Washington, D.C. was something that I never dreamed of. The whole week, which I spent with 100 exchange students from all over the world, was the greatest thing in my life. Each day of the workshop was full of different excursions, interesting meetings, and new discoveries! And when I stood right across from the White House or taking pictures at the Lincoln Memorial, I could not explain how thankful I was for the opportunity of being an exchange student. My academic year is almost over, but I will always remember the Civic Education Workshop as the most awesome event!

—Sofiia (FLEX, Ukraine), hosted by the German family (TX)

Are the crowds cheering for the maize and blue or for Sushant?

Sofiia proudly displays the Ukrainian flag outside the White House.

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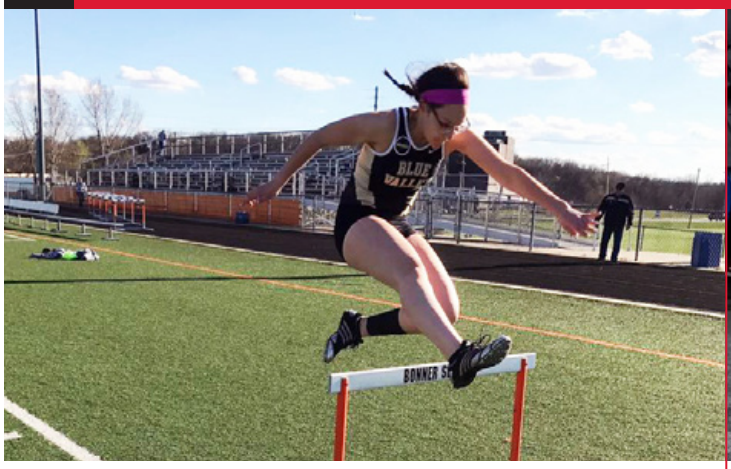
Get Involved!



There's nothing Milica can't hurdle!

Teerapat poses with a pig in Pike Place Market.

Jumping in With Both Feet

When I came to United States, I explored lots of new sports, and this spring I decided to try track. I have been doing sprints and hurdles, and on April 7, our school organized a senior night where all the seniors were recognized. It was a real honor to walk on the football field with my mom and dad in front of the whole school. Track means a lot to me, and I always try to do my best. I have made so many of my friends there, and it has become an important part of my life. Being a "Tiger" in the middle of United States is definitely one of the best things that has happened to me.

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

Lacrosse and Cross-Country Adventures

I have had a really nice April. It has been a pretty interesting month, because I had an Easter egg hunt (who knew about such things). I also joined the JV lacrosse team. I have never played this sport before, so it is quite interesting to play it. (I am still working on getting better at passing and catching.)

I also had a really fun time during spring break. We traveled all the way to Washington State! We stayed on an island right by Seattle called Vashon. It was raining a lot, but we still had fun. I went to the Gum Wall and Pike Place Market. There were people throwing fish around—so cool!

—Teerapat (Thailand), hosted by the Wann family (MI)

A Natural on the Tennis Court

Nathalia came from Brazil to reside in rural Mississippi with her host parents Jody and Jessi Skinner and two host siblings. Despite never having played tennis before, Nathalia qualified for the state tennis match through the Mississippi High School Athletic Association.

Upon her arrival in the U.S. and enrollment at Union High School, Nathalia desired to play a sport, and tennis was her only option. She is quick to admit she had no clue what she was doing, and Coach Brian Norman says he allowed her on the team—last on the team roster—so she could have the experience of playing a sport at an American high school. He is happy to say that it was a good decision! Nathalia heads to the state playoffs from May 8-10 in Oxford. Read about her success in this article.

—Christopher Alexander (MS), community coordinator

Nathalia quickly discovered her love (and talent) for tennis!

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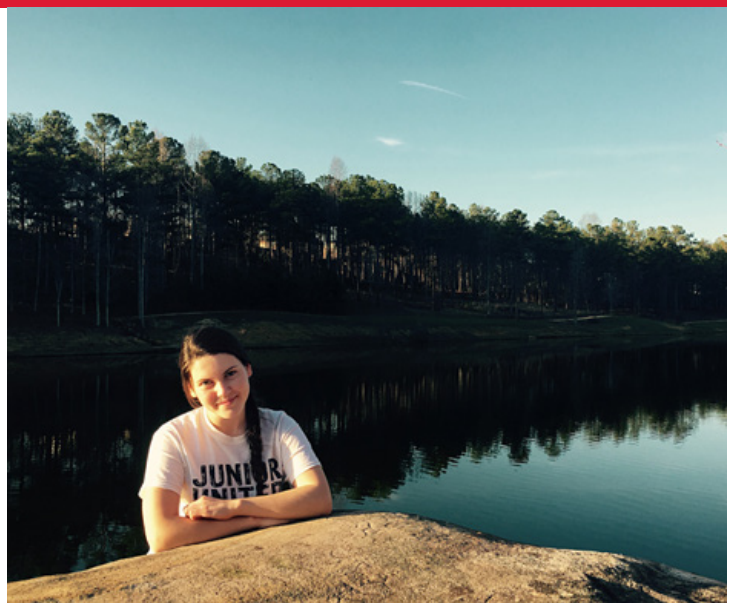
New Definitions

From the time we are little kids, the experiences we have shape us, turning regular words into specific and personal definitions of our own. We associate "home" with something, "friends" with something else, and the word "right" is a very narrow pathway for us. Not anymore!

Coming to the United States challenged all of my definitions. "Home" is no longer the only home. My good friends are no longer the only good friends, and all of a sudden I realize it does not necessarily have to be my way to be "right."

I didn't lose any of my old definitions. On the contrary, I made them better. I added something vital to being happy—an open heart. This year in the United States had a huge impact on me, on forming my definitions on how things are supposed to be. I think that's what it's all about. Growing. Improving. Redefining the old definitions.

—Madalina (FLEX, Moldova), hosted by the Hirst family (AL)



Madalina reflects on how her definitions have shifted as an exchange student.

Wanhar has *golden* memories of her year in America!

Bridging All Gaps

I was lucky enough to visit California recently! I saw towering redwood trees, the Winchester Mystery House, and Hearst Castle. We crossed three famous bridges, including the Golden Gate Bridge, which is my favorite. I can't help but adore the iconic landmark, remembering that years ago, I just looked at it on a computer screen. Feeling the fresh air from an historic cable car and witnessing downtown San Francisco was an inexplicable experience. Of everything, it is my host family that stands out. And I know a time will come for my turn to welcome them in the Philippines, in return for showing me the other side of the world and being there for me.

—Wanhar (YES, Philippines), hosted by the Doyle family (WA)

Somebunny is Going to be Missed!

Over Easter weekend, Shu and Aziz visited their host cousins in Plymouth, IN, for Easter family fun and an egg hunt! The boys have made such an impact on their host cousins that Khloe actually asked me, "Aunt Sabrina, could you please adopt Ah-Shu and Ah-sneeze (their nicknames) so that they don't have to go home?" Khloe's mother had shared that Easter might be the last time she and her brother Cadien, age three, might see the boys, and he was very sad. Cadien adores the boys, especially Aziz, who is amazing with kids and is a "baby whisperer!" I thought it was the sweetest thing that my nieces and nephews love my exchange sons that much!

—Sabrina Hickey (IN), community coordinator and host mom of Abdul (YES, Saudi Arabia) and Shu (Japan)

Shu piles on during Easter family fun.

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As Seen in Social Media

Ten Top Teens

Following a very special group of young people in Alabama, the *Ten Top Teens* series continues! If you liked the first installment, you're going to love meeting the irrepressible Zhanaiym (FLEX, Kyrgyzstan) and the methodical Dmytro (FLEX, Ukraine). (Be sure not to miss Zhanaiym's outtakes at the end to get a sense for her unique comedic stylings!)

April Highlights

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