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Florida Family "Elects" to Host Again

The week of the general election, we took Louisa (Germany) to Washington, D.C. Beyond the excitement surrounding the campaigns, we also visited the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and all of the war memorials. She also toured the National Archives and the Capitol, guided by a staff member of U.S. Representative Bill Posey (R-FL).

My husband Stuart and I previously hosted another German exchange student. His name was Reimut, and he was with us from 1989-1990, when we lived in Phenix City, AL. Reimut was on the basketball and tennis teams and became a dedicated University of Alabama football fan. He was living with us when the Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989.

Three months into his exchange year, Reimut became very sick and had to be hospitalized. He was diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes, and his mother flew over from Germany to be with him and decide a course of action. Because of his maturity, independence, and discipline, Reimut not only finished out his year, but he thrived. He accomplished so much and completely assimilated into our family and circle of friends. We told him that because of our experience with him, we were going to consider hosting another exchange student. He said, "No, I'll be the only one."

And he was—until his eldest daughter, Louisa, joined us 26 years later!

While we didn't host any exchange students between Reimut and Louisa, we have been greatly rewarded through the years with visits. Reimut, along with his wife, Cecylia, as well as his sister, parents, and friends have visited us in most of the states where we've lived. In addition, we spent two weeks in Germany in 2014. In the summer of 2015, Reimut, Cecylia, Louisa, and her two sisters spent part of their vacation with us in Florida. We knew then that Louisa would fit in nicely as a new family member.

Louisa was on the high school swim team this fall and is going to try out for the tennis team this spring. Just a few weeks ago, she experienced her first collegiate football game in Tuscaloosa, watching the Crimson Tide. She now understands the passion of Southeastern Conference football, and the Tide has another German fan!

—Lisa Mitchell (FL),
host mom of Louisa (Germany)

Giving Thanks

Building Relationships

As time passes, I get more and more attached to my host community and especially my host family. The thought of leaving them has started giving me goosebumps already, because I have started loving them as my real family, and they feel the same way.

I brought traditional Pakistani clothes for my host family. On one of my religious holidays, I dressed up in my cultural clothes and was surprised to see that the whole family was wearing theirs too. That was one of the sweetest things anyone has ever done for me.

I decided to make a table as a surprise Thanksgiving present for my family to show my love for them. My host family's last name is "Staff," so I put Staff at the end of my own name to show them that I love them as my own family.

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

This was a true labor of love for Yousaf!

So Thankful

I cannot find words to describe how happy I am for everything that is going on in my life. I feel so blessed, and I am thankful to God because He gave me this opportunity to spend a year far from home to really find myself.

This celebration with my friends from all over the world—Germany, Georgia, Mexico, Venezuela, and more—was taken at a "Friendsgiving" event, where I learned about Thanksgiving customs, including the delicious food. It was great preparation for the upcoming holiday. You can see we are having an amazing time together. Moments like these make me feel so special and loved.

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

Milica (top row, with glasses) and her friends are grateful for each other!

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The Adjustment Cycle

A change.

Is it a good idea?
Is it too far away?
Is it too mysterious?
Is it too expensive?
Is it too much for me?
Is it too fast for me?
Am I too young for it?
Am I strong enough?
Am I brave enough?
Am I outgoing enough?
Am I open enough?
Am I prepared?...
What about my old friends?
What if I loose them?
Could I just leave them?
What about my family?
What if I don't like it?
What if nobody would like me?
What about the language?
What if I don't understand?
What if I can't communicate?
What about my old life?
What if it'll be different?
What if I'll be different?
What if I'll change so much?…
And what about my dog?
What if he goes missing?
What if he runs away?
What if somebody bad finds him?
What if he gets taken?
What if he forgets me?
What will I do then?
Will I manage?

—Aleksandra (Poland), hosted by the Frieden family (UT)

Kahfi snaps a selfie with his host family before heading out on the trail!

Camping in the Great Outdoors

Last month, I had three days full of adventures during my first camping trip. My host family and I went to Kettle Moraine in Wisconsin, where I got to do a lot of new things, such as sleep in a sleeping bag, chop wood, go on a six-kilometer hike, and spend the evening by a bonfire. My favorite part was chopping the wood using an axe, which my host dad taught me how to use. We also spent lots of time to prepare meals. It was very cold at night, and I needed more than three layers of clothes. I have never gotten that cold in my country, but I'm really happy to have had that camping experience. Check out my video!

—Kahfi (YES, Indonesia), hosted by the Schwab family (MN)

Amina among the beautiful white birches

Fall Makes Me Happy

It has already been three months since I came to the U.S., and I'm having a blast. I got to see so many breathtaking places in Arizona and Utah. Twice this fall I went to see the beautiful white birch tree forests changing the color of their leaves. It was astonishing.

I went hiking for the first time on my third day in Flagstaff, and I loved it. I also hiked the San Francisco peaks, which was really hard. But I kept moving forward, meeting people along the way who kept cheering me until I made it to the top of the highest mountain in Arizona. I am lucky that I'm part of a community that pushes me to do things that I was afraid of doing and makes me discover a new passion—to love and appreciate nature and the environment.

—Amina (YES, Tunisia), hosted by the Lenz family (AZ)

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Coordinator Corner

End-of-the-year party, two years ago—the neighbors think I have an interesting life.

Reflecting on my Role as an Exchange Student Coordinator

I have been an exchange coordinator in the small town of Sedona for about 20 years. In 2002, I went on a trip to Morocco for educators; the trip was sponsored by a Fulbright Hayes Scholarship. The goal was for us to learn about a corner of the Islamic world and share what we learned with our students back home. It was my "mini-exchange" of sorts, and it was a powerful one for me.

After returning, I felt the desire to bring Muslim students to our area in order to share the richness of the broader Muslim world with my community. And indeed, having Muslim YES students here has brought that richness to our community. That said, it has not always been easy.

I always tell my students, "Even stupid questions are a gift. It shows that people are interested; they want to know more. This is your opportunity to clarify misconceptions and show them how diverse and great Muslims are!" One year, an exchange student from Kosovo did not receive so much a question as an accusation. She was told by an American student that "All Muslims are terrorists." The young lady from Kosovo replied, "Excuse me, I am Muslim and I am not a terrorist."

After the incident, she was determined to speak in the nearby community of Cottonwood to dispel such myths. After her talk and an influential board meeting, we were able to bring YES students into Cottonwood schools. Not only did the principal support our program—she hosted a student from Yemen!

These days, we have four schools open to our students. They give back through extensive volunteering and are engaged in sports, clubs, and the full spectrum of teenage life at high school. They also hold presentations about their countries and cultures in their classes, to their entire schools, and for church communities as well. Of course, formal presentations during International Education Week are not the only time that there is cultural learning going on. Students enlighten on a daily basis—at the dinner table, in school hallways, or even in the grocery store.

When YES students are in America, they are also exposed to many enriching opportunities. In 2012, I was able to take my exchange students to Washington, D.C. (through the kindness and generosity of a community member and friend). The girls met congressional representatives, gave presentations on their countries and culture, were exposed to principles of democracy, and felt a unique sense pride throughout the experience—representing their countries in the U.S. capital.

One student who was especially touched by the experience was Satta Dinuwelle from Liberia. It was clear that she took a special belief in herself and the possibilities of the future away from that trip. Satta has since become a certified nursing assistant—no small task in her country—and wants to continue on to nursing school. Recently, she was in Washington, D.C. with First Lady Michelle Obama as part of the Let Girls Learn initiative and in conjunction with the CNN film project *We Will Rise*.

My favorite part of any exchange year is our re-entry meeting. Students are asked how their opinions of America and Americans have changed. A male student from the Middle East stated, "I thought all Americans wanted to do was go to war. But they are the kindest and most giving people." It's also been touching to hear student observations about the level of respect with which American society approaches disabled communities. I've had students say, "I want to take this back to our country and change how the physically handicapped are treated."

Is there an impact on these foreign students? I will let you be the judge. I will only say that "Small ripples lead to big waves." As for me, I'm going to continue to help these impressive young people splash around.

—Marcia Goebel,
PAX community coordinator (AZ)

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YES Student Ambassadors in Arizona

Eight YES students living in Flagstaff, Sedona, and Cottonwood went to Phoenix November 4–6 to attend a semi-annual breakfast that Senator Jeff Flake puts on for his constituents. Although Senator Flake could not attend, Senator McCain and retired Senator Kyl took his place. The students heard Senator McCain deliver a speech and answer constituent questions. They also got to meet with him briefly and took photos. They spent time with Senator Kyl, who answered many student questions, which they had prepared and we had discussed at length the evening prior.

The students showed maturity beyond their years in their meeting with Sen. Kyl. They focused on making their questions as substantive as possible, discussing the role of religion in politics, U.S. foreign policies in the Middle East, and the importance of student exchanges. Senator Kyl stressed the importance of civil dialogue to resolve both domestic and foreign issues.

Before the breakfast, the students introduced themselves to members of the public and then sat at separate tables so that they could engage with even more people. I received several compliments from those individuals with whom they spoke. Throughout the weekend, all of the students showed responsible behavior, followed all instructions, and were very gracious.

—George Cedic (AZ), enhancement trip leader

Amina (Tunisia), Dina (Gaza), Ayten (Turkey), Ozlem (Turkey), Marzaan (Bangladesh), Malika (FLEX, Kazakhstan), Ruksar (India), and Zina (Israel, Arab Communities) pose with Senator John McCain.

William Horlick High School, meet Turkmenistan.

Community Service is Fun!

Earlier this month, I volunteered my time to help at a fundraiser for the Association for the Rights of Citizens with handicaps (ARCh), a nonprofit for individuals with developmental disabilities. It was one of the unforgettable parts of my U.S. experience! The night was incredible. I got to help attendees choose which activity they wanted to fund and take the live auction winning bids to the official recorder, among many other fun "jobs." Never in my life have I been to an auction, where people debate on the prices of items. It was a very enjoyable night with my coordinator, Lisa Forman.

Last week, in just my second month in a U.S. high school, I was recognized as Student of the Month at William Horlick High School. What an honor to receive gifts and hear a wonderful comment from my medical terminology teacher, who said I excelled in academics and service to school and community.

—Serdar (FLEX, Turkmenistan), hosted by the McMahon family (WI)

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Embracing Challenges

Being an exchange student in a new country and society is challenging. But with the passage of time, this new home and people feel like my own home and people. As I am in my journey towards an awesome exchange year, I have made a lot of friends.

Recently I went with other exchange students and our local coordinator to a resort, where we played games, went swimming and hiking, and had fun. We spent just one day and night there, but it was an awesome experience for me. Being an exchange student adds color to life, bring nations closer, and shows us how close we live to each other in our hearts.

—Aisha (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Thomas family (OH)

Aisha takes in a beautiful fall day.

Fall Frolic

A Halloween party was held at Lost Corner Farms for exchange students and their families. Everyone enjoyed a night of touring a haunted house, taking a hayride, eating a delicious dinner, toasting marshmallows and making S'mores, looking at the miniature goats and beautiful horses, apple bobbing, and of course, the costume contest!

This year's winners were Nanako from Japan (first place), hosted by the Turner family, who owns the farm; Nicolas from Germany (second place), hosted by the Barron family; and YES student Mihir from India (third place) hosted by the Malone family.

—Mary Payne Hairald (MS), PAX area manager

Nanako, Mihir, and Nicolas proudly display their Halloween costume trophies!

Connected at the Heart

Julia Roberts once said, "I believe that two people are connected at the heart, and it doesn't matter what you do, or who you are or where you live; there are no boundaries or barriers if two people are destined to be together."

I understood the true meaning of this quote when I arrived in the U.S. and met my host family, who was waiting for me with a banner that said "Welcome Usman." When I got here, it was in the middle of a Muslim holiday, Eid al-Adha, which is celebrated in my home country. I was cherishing the memories I had of this festival back home and decided that I should celebrate with my family here. When I told my host family about it, they were excited to celebrate the event. I gave them some traditional Pakistani clothing that they could wear for it. On the day of the festival, we all dressed up and captured some beautiful moments.

—Usman (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Taylor family (WI)

Usman and his host family proudly wear Pakistani clothing.

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Get Involved!

Give My Regards to Broadway!

Before coming to the U.S. I decided to have as many different experiences as possible during my exchange year. When I heard about an audition for "Twelfth Night," I thought I'd give it a try, but I was nervous. The audition went fine but I didn't expect it when I heard that I got a main role!

During one rehearsal, the director suddenly stopped and called my name. I got nervous until I heard her say, "Majreeha! You are staggering about face expressions!" On the last night of our show, she told me that I had been amazing during the whole play, and she asked me to continue working with her in her private theatre company.

It was a very good moment for me, and I feel very lucky because I had the chance to see what I can do. I never knew I could perform on a big stage, but I did. Being an exchange student means you get the chance to judge and experience who you are.

—Majreeha (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Schmidt family (WA)

Majreeha (blue dress) has a commanding stage presence!

America Shows New Horizons

At the beginning of my exchange year, I joined a cross country team at my school, Academy of Richmond County. In Ukraine, I had practiced fencing for five years, so running was something new. I met a lot of great people and made good friends.

At the beginning of the season it was hard to me to run such a long distance, but my coach and my team's support helped me a lot. I've been practicing for two months, and I have enjoyed every meet. We even won first place at the all-county meet at Diamond Lakes Regional Park and the regional meet at Council Farms in Milledgeville. It was astonishing, thrilling, and amazing. I'm so happy to be a part of it.

—Marta (FLEX, Ukraine), hosted by the Norris family (GA)

Marta (far right) celebrates with her cross country teammates—regional champs!

Everything's Coming Up Roses!

My adventure as an exchange student at Foothill HS began in mid-August. I jumped right in and started band camp the day after I arrived, joining the Color Guard, which for me was a completely new world. I was led into it by my amazing host sister, who is a Drum Corps International world champion. I quickly learned how to dance and spin a flag on the field with the marching band. It was a little bit confusing in the beginning, but the more I practiced, the easier it got.

I am really happy to have the opportunity to be in Color Guard because I get to see the beauty of swinging colorful flags every day. We have performed at every home game and in state and regional competitions, and we will be performing in the Rose Bowl Parade in California this January. I could not be happier to have joined such a wonderful activity!

—Anna (Germany), hosted by the Thueson family, NV

Anna and the Color Guard are bound for the Rose Bowl!

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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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