

## ***To be a Rotary Youth Exchange student... By Lea Richter***



### **What does it mean to be an exchange student?**

Exchange students willingly leave home to venture into the unknown, to explore, to find a second home across the sea. That's only the initial mentality, however...

Exchange students get to experience life twice, relearning a language and a culture, finding completely new friends

and adjusting oneself to a family that is not their own. Amongst these challenges, one may learn great gratefulness and humbleness. Before exchange, I never felt like I really had to try too much at anything, school, family, or otherwise. Dropped into a culture where I knew no one and spoke very little, it became a requirement to be

constantly self-aware. I had to watch how I treated my families, be aware of all actions I took and their effects on others. I had to really study and put a lot of effort into schoolwork and language studies, not simply as a light interest, but as a basis of survival.



Exchange will change the way one views the world, where things that might have been very important before, become less significant in relativity to the big picture. One may also realize that "big picture" is much bigger than they originally thought. In any case, despite any difficulties one may have, going on exchange is the most fulfilling, enlightening, and simply fun opportunity I have ever taken advantage of, and I know thousands of other students around the world who have shared this experience would agree. Students aren't simply self-fulfilling, though. Exchange students can add a level of diversity and generate interest in other cultures in their peers and communities. Nothing inspires learning a language more than an exchange student in one's class. Exchange students are also typically chosen to break stereotypes, and there is nothing more rewarding than telling a group of Europeans that you are an American who doesn't like hamburgers... In short, an exchange student, as a representative of their country and culture, will impress almost as much on their hosts as their hosts on them.

What does it mean to host an exchange student? Host parents and clubs are two of the most important parts of an exchange student's life. To be open, to change, to find one adjusting to small pieces of another culture while trying to find common ground, these are just several responsibilities held by hosts. From their families, students truly learn the culture in which they live, the mannerisms of a language, and the importance of communication and compromise. Students, however, are not the only people to benefit. Opening up one's home to a student is comparable to adopting a child: in which they become a part of every aspect of family life, good and bad. Explaining things to an exchange student often makes one realize something peculiar about his/her own culture that may never have had any significance before. One may also find one's family values and relations challenged, revealing the weaker aspects of a family, but also finding better ways to address that aspect, and strengthening the family.

Host clubs are, of course, essential for any RYE. Speaking from experience, clubs, both at home and abroad, can easily become a student's support group and escape. Clubs can make or break an exchange, and I was extremely lucky to fall into two clubs that made my exchange unforgettable. Club meetings encourage students to practice their language, mingle, and learn a bit more about their

community and the programs in their area. Through my Belgian club I was able to get involved in the Leo's (young Lions) club, which did activities every month, and helped me see a lot of Belgium. My club also supported my involvement in the "Resto du Coeur", a type of soup kitchen/financial support for the extremely poor and homeless. In short, my Rotary club supported me in being a better exchange student, and I will always be grateful to them for everything they did for my exchange. To be a host club is to change a student's life, and therefore is a large responsibility. However, if your club is as excited and passionate about Rotary as my clubs were, you can give a student one of the best experiences of their life, and a lasting interest in helping Rotary International.