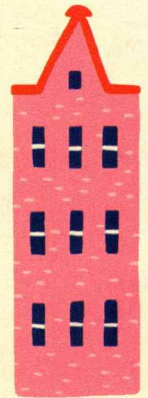


ROTARY

September 2020

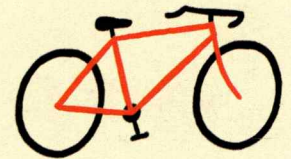
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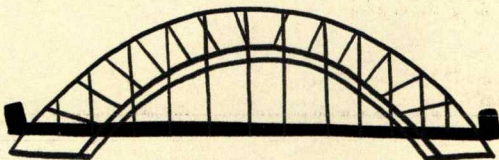
Rotary Youth
Exchange has
opened up
the world for
generations

page 28



A life-changing

Adventure



Rotary 



ROTARY YOUTH EXCHANGE — one of the many programs for youths and young adults that we celebrate this month — was my path into true engagement in Rotary. My wife, Susanne, and I began hosting exchange students soon after I joined, and the experience helped me go from simply being a member of my Rotary club to being a true Rotarian. Now Rotary Youth Exchange is a family tradition, and a strong one: Over the past 24 years, we have hosted 43 students!

From the start, we loved it so much that, in addition to hosting students in our home, we became involved with the program by helping to organize student summer camps. During one such camp, I met Christine Lichtin, who was a German high school student at the time and whose father is a past president of my Rotary club. To try something new during this year of embracing change, I am turning this space, normally reserved for the president of Rotary, over to Christine so she can share her story.

My first contact with Rotaract was about 13 years ago, when I was with Susanne and Holger at a barbecue for the summer youth camp. Holger turned to me and said: "Why don't you visit a Rotaract club? You'll meet a lot of great young people who come together to have fun and to make a difference."

A few years later, when I was at Trier University, his words came back to me and I decided to give it a try. That was more than eight years ago, and I'm still at it. Once you are in Rotaract, you just don't want to get out. Rotaract has accompanied me everywhere, starting with the Trier club and then on to a club in Bologna, Italy, during the year I studied there. When I was in Kiel for my master's

degree, I got involved with Rotaract there before landing at the Rotaract Club of Hamburg-Alstertal as I began my career. Each of those clubs has its own identity and focus, but all have the same intrinsic motivation.

I am now taking on a senior advisory role in my Rotaract club, which I really enjoy. I carry Rotaract in my heart, and it shapes my values, even as my interests evolve. One day, as if she had sensed this evolution, Susanne knocked on my door, wanting to introduce me to a young, modern Rotary club located between Hamburg and Mölln, my hometown. The E-Club of Hamburg-Connect, which Susanne helped charter, holds e-meetings, all of them very relaxed and personal. With members of different ages, everything just seemed to fit, so I thought, why not try it out? After all, time is precious and should be filled with fun whenever possible; the rest happens by itself.

Now I am in both worlds — a proud member of Rotaract and a Rotarian. And my small personal goal is to build a bridge between these two parallel worlds. All of us have very similar reasons for being part of the Rotary family.

It took some persistence to persuade Christine to become a member of Rotary, but it was well worth the effort. It is our duty to put in this kind of effort with youth program participants and Rotaractors so we can keep them in the family of Rotary. I hope you were inspired by her story. It's up to each of us to ensure that more young people like Christine can experience the many ways *Rotary Opens Opportunities* for us and for the people we serve.

HOLGER KNAACK

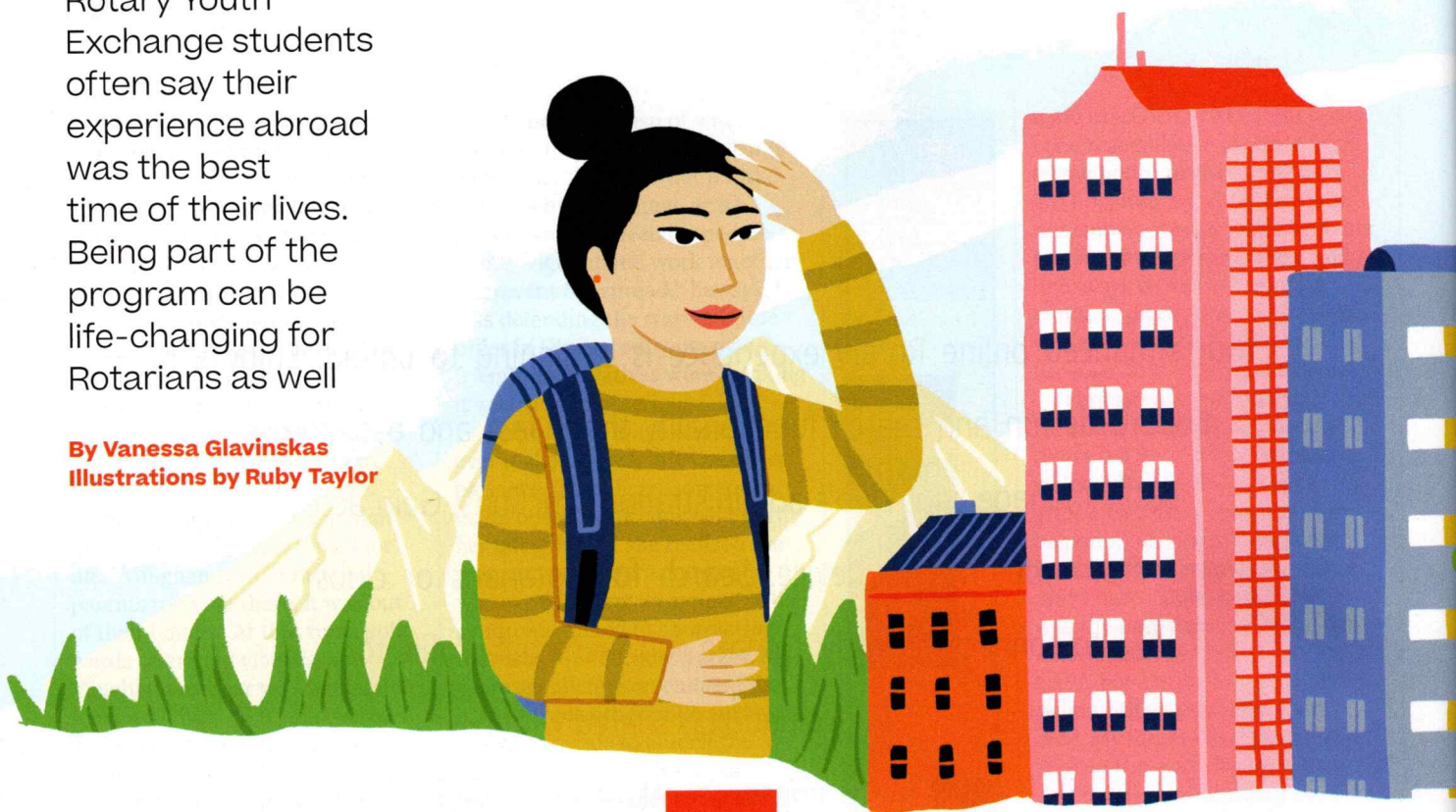
President, Rotary International



Christine Lichtin
Rotaract Club of Hamburg-Alstertal, Rotary E-Club of Hamburg-Connect

Rotary Youth
Exchange students
often say their
experience abroad
was the best
time of their lives.
Being part of the
program can be
life-changing for
Rotarians as well

By Vanessa Glavinskas
Illustrations by Ruby Taylor



Adve





Passport to Adventure



FOR MORE THAN 40 years, Rotary Youth Exchange has been one of Rotary's best-known programs. As an official program, it dates to 1975 — but by that time, Rotary clubs had already been sending students abroad for decades with the aim of promoting international understanding and friendship.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic postponed some exchanges, the ethos of Rotary Youth Exchange remains strong. What the program offers to and asks of participants — an openness to new ideas and

experiences, a willingness to adapt and to gain new perspectives, and an opportunity to make new friends and learn new ways of living — are the same values that define Rotary itself.

"The major goal of Youth Exchange is to dive into another culture," says Rotary President Holger Knaack, who served as chair of the German Multi-District Youth Exchange; he and his wife, Susanne, have themselves hosted dozens of students. "Youth Exchange is an opportunity for the kids to experience something new. And it has enriched our own lives."

How Rotary Youth Exchange changed my life

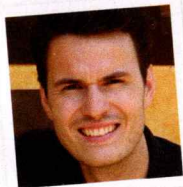
The intercultural entrepreneur

When Tim Pfrogner was in Los Angeles on his exchange in 2010, he participated in a service project that altered his

career trajectory. “In our district, we do a humanitarian trip every year,” says Melody St. John, a member of the Rotary Club of Hollywood, California, who with her husband, Paul, hosted Pfrogner during his exchange

year. “Tim was with us when we did a water filter project in the Dominican Republic, and he was fascinated.”

After returning home to Germany, Pfrogner went on to study at the Technical University of Munich, but he couldn’t forget what he had experienced on his exchange — or the fact that 800 million people around the world do not have access to safe drinking water. In 2014, he co-founded a startup, called Waterfilter, that works in the Kigoma region of Tanzania and is now supported by the Rotary Club of München-International. With his team, he developed a sustainable business model to distribute an innovative water purification product made using local resources. Waterfilter trains unemployed



people to open up their own Waterfilter shop, where they build the filters and sell them to members of their community for an affordable price. “This way,” Pfrogner says, “we do not only provide clean and safe drinking water; we also create jobs.”

Pfrogner says his experience with Rotary Youth Exchange was pivotal. “Being confronted with different cultures at such an early time in my life strengthened my ability to have empathy for others,” he says. “Youth Exchange taught me to follow my passions.”

The globe-trotting journalist

In 2001, Isabelle Roughol left France to spend a year in Montclair, New Jersey. Two weeks after she arrived, the United States was rocked by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. “I could see the World Trade Center from my bedroom window,” she recalls. “Students in my school had parents who worked in lower Manhattan, teachers were worried for spouses, sirens were blasting. Everyone was in a state of shock.” Roughol remembers that day as eerie and sad, but she never questioned whether she should continue her exchange in New Jersey. “The sense of community was really strong in Montclair,” she says. “I felt supported.”

That year shaped her. She became bolder. Something frightening had happened, but with the support of her host family and community she was able to cope. “I could sometimes be timid and unsure of myself,” she recalls. “That year taught me that good things can come when you take chances.”

She continued to bet on herself and her ability to adapt. “I got my bachelor’s degree from the University of Missouri. I embarked on a career in journalism, writing in English, and I’ve lived in Australia, Cambodia, and the UK. My Youth Exchange year launched me into a global life and a global career. It was the start of everything.”

The pandemic responder

“I didn’t imagine possibilities for myself before I went abroad,” says Lorelei Higgins, who grew up in Spruce Grove, Alberta. “Many of my friends stayed in our small town and had families.” Today, Higgins is back in Canada, working





for the city of Calgary, where her job is focused on building peace locally. Her most ambitious project is the creation of an indigenous relations office.

Her Rotary Youth Exchange experience in South Africa in 1998-99 inspired her to study political science and international relations. "I was 17 when I went to South Africa. I had never been on an airplane, I spoke no other languages, I had grown up in a small town in Canada. That's what I think is so fundamental about the program: It opens up opportunities at a critical age," she says. "When I finished my degree, I couldn't wait to leave Canada. I had that

Rotary bug to be out there doing service."

"That Rotary bug" inspired Higgins to go to Bolivia, where she had an internship with a Canadian nonprofit called Ghost River Rediscovery that helped connect young

members of indigenous communities to their roots. She continued working for the organization in Calgary before



"Being confronted with different cultures at such an early time in my life strengthened my ability to have empathy for others."

taking a job with the city — which now has landed her on the front lines of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As lead staff member for community connections, she puts residents together with the resources they need, from groceries to garbage pickup. She recently arranged for 10,000 pounds of restaurant food that would have gone to waste to be delivered to vulnerable families.

Until normal life resumes, she's happy to serve in any way she can. In fact, her year abroad helped prepare her for this moment. "It taught me to be adaptable and flexible," she says.

The enthusiastic host family

For Mother's Day this year, Melody St. John's husband, Paul, himself a member of the Rotary Club of Los Angeles, organized a virtual get-together with 20 people — all former Rotary Youth Exchange students who have stayed with the couple in their Los Angeles home. "They surprised me with a beautiful slideshow" of photos from their exchanges, she says. "We talked about how we're doing and how we're coping" with being in lockdown because of COVID-19.

The St. Johns almost didn't become exchange hosts. "I was hesitant because we didn't have kids," Melody explains; she wasn't sure they would know how to navigate integrating a teenager into their household. But when the couple's first student,



Did you know?

- Oscar-winning actor **Matthew McConaughey** traveled from Texas to Australia as a Rotary Youth Exchange student in 1988.
- Blazers are emblematic of Rotary's Youth Exchange program. Each participant gets a blazer in a color based on their home country. Students often **cover the blazers with pins** they trade with one another.

Federico, arrived from Argentina in 1996, everything clicked — and their lives changed. “We had so much fun with him,” she remembers. “It was such a joy. We took him everywhere, and he brightened our lives.” For the next two decades, the St. Johns continued opening their home to new students — some of whom were siblings of students who had stayed with them earlier. They even started organizing a cross-country train tour for all the exchange students in their district.

In 2018, they took a break from hosting as Melody prepared to serve as 2019-20 governor of District 5280 — but in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, they opened their home yet again. “One of our former students, Pietro, lives nearby. He asked if he could shelter here with



us,” Melody explains. “He also wanted to do the shopping for us, so we didn’t have to go out.”

The couple now can’t imagine their lives without Rotary Youth Exchange. “I was sad for a long time because I couldn’t have kids,” Melody says. “But now I’ve got over 20 of the

coolest kids, and they all call me Mom. We’ve gone to our former students’ weddings; we’ve been to Poland for Easter and Spain for Christmas. We have family all over the world.”

The leadership adviser

“I joined Rotary because I wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself,” says Claudia Taha, a member of the Rotary Club of Londrina-Alvorada in Brazil.

But after a while, Taha wasn’t sure joining had been the right decision. “There were times I was about to leave,” she says. “I thought, this is not for me. I don’t want to just go to meetings.” Then she got involved with her district’s Rotary Youth Exchange program.

“I became interested in Youth Exchange because of my kids,” she



explains. All three of her children participated in the program — her son and older daughter went on yearlong exchanges to the United States, and her younger daughter traveled to Germany and Italy on a short-term program.

“When I first got involved, it was hard to attract students to Brazil,” she explains. “We were competing with Europe and Asia.”

Taha wanted to change how the program in District 4710 was structured, and she got the chance when she became Rotary Youth Exchange co-chair for the district.

“We wrote to Rotary International and asked permission to market it as a program to develop young leaders — exchange included,” she says. “I wanted to add value to our program by incorporating a social component.” To accomplish this, the district pairs prospective outbound students with students who are currently on exchange in Brazil. They work together on a service project — such as visiting the elderly or volunteering in an impoverished neighborhood. “By doing this, Rotarians have a lot of contact with the students. The students learn Portuguese faster because in the communities we help, no one speaks English. At the same time, we are providing students who want to be involved in community work a reason to choose Rotary Youth Exchange.”

Taha also found that pairing inbound and outbound students turned the teenagers themselves into ambassadors for the program. “They film and post on Instagram what they are doing and show the impact on society,” she explains. “At the beginning it was just us, the committee, talking to families, talking to kids. Now we have young people talking to young people.” Over the past seven years, the district has gone from sending four students abroad to sending 20.

“We’re selecting people to become leaders, not just to travel,” says Taha, explaining the fulfillment she gets from being part of the Rotary Youth Exchange program. “I’m still in Rotary because of this program.”



Did you participate in Rotary Youth Exchange? Connect to Rotex International, the association for program alumni, at rotex.org.

“Before I studied abroad, Japan was the world standard for me. People in Mexico and Japan have very different social skills, different ways of thinking about time, different ways of living, and I keenly realized the world is huge. Through studying abroad, I came to believe that Japan is only a part of the world.”

—**Hideyuki Fujita**, Japan to Mexico, 2001-02
Now: Uses his language skills as a marketing and sales specialist for Mexico and Latin America for Nippon Express



On his first audition, Joel Jackson told himself: “I’ve just got to do what I did in Brazil: jump in and trust that I’ll be able to handle myself.”

—**Joel Jackson**, Australia to Brazil, 2009
Now: Award-winning TV and film actor in Australia, best known for his roles as Charles Bean in *Deadline Gallipoli* and Peter Allen in *Peter Allen: Not the Boy Next Door*

“Rotary Youth Exchange taught me to be adaptable and flexible.”

"My relationship with Rotary began as a Rotary Youth Exchange student and continued as a member of a Group Study Exchange team. Later, as a Rotary Peace Fellow, I began a process of learning about leadership that will continue throughout my life."

—**Anabella Palacios**, Argentina to Turkey, 1998-99
Now: Urban planner who sailed to Antarctica with 89 other women from 26 countries to highlight the influence and impact of women in making decisions that shape our planet

"My true education began in Thailand, and, in many ways, I consider it the country of my birth."

—**Karen Connelly**, Canada to Thailand, 1986-87
Now: Author, professor, and trauma therapist. Her first book, *Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal*, a bestseller, detailed her time spent on exchange in Thailand

"That year in Osaka shaped my life. It gave me an incredible foundation and the courage to travel the world and spread my wings."

—**Antoni Slodkowski**, Poland to Japan, 2003-04
Now: Reuters news correspondent in Japan and Pulitzer Prize winner



While on exchange, Rebel Wilson contracted malaria. "When I was in the hospital in intensive care, I had this hallucination that I was an actress and that I was really, really good, and that I won an Oscar." That fever-induced moment inspired her to change her career path to acting.

—**Rebel Wilson**, Australia to South Africa, 1998
Now: Hollywood actress, writer, comedian, producer

"A friend of mine was making a TV show about foreigners who travel the Korean countryside. He asked me to appear, because I was this young Belgian guy who could speak Korean. The show aired after I returned to Belgium, and it was a crazy success. The producer called me and said, 'You have to come

back.' I was just 18 and was supposed to go to university, but suddenly I had a chance to go back to a country I loved and be on TV. My parents were very supportive. They said, 'Of course you have to do this. It's the opportunity of a lifetime.'"

—**Julian Quintart**, Belgium to Korea, 2004-05
Now: Korean TV personality

10 things every Rotarian should know about Rotary Youth Exchange

1

Rotary Youth Exchange is **run by volunteers**, which means costs are lower than many other exchange programs.

2

While it's useful for students to know their **host country's language**, it's not a requirement of the program.

3

Rotary's stringent youth protection policies and district certification program **ensure that the safety of students is the highest priority**.

4

Host families are not paid. Every family is screened and goes through a background check. Families are asked to treat students like a member of the family and to include them in all their normal activities.



5

Exchanges are for students **between ages 15 and 19**.

6

Long-term exchanges often last a full academic year, and **students are required to attend school**. They typically live with several host families during the year.

7

Short-term exchanges, which can last from a few days up to three months, are often structured as a camp or a homestay when school is not in session.

8

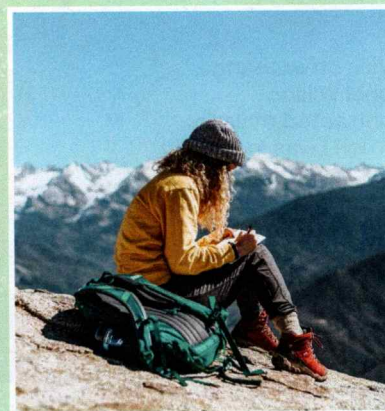
There is usually no cost to students for room and board or school fees. **Students are typically responsible for their travel costs and for spending money.**

9

In many districts, students can take part in **service projects** organized by local Rotary clubs or by alumni associations called Rotex.

10

Upon their return, students are invited to stay connected to Rotary as part of a Rotex group. **Rotary clubs are encouraged to stay in touch with their past participants**, who can also offer advice and guidance to current and prospective exchange students.



Learn more about Rotary Youth Exchange at rotary.org/youthexchange. Want to dive deeper into how your club or district can get involved in the program? Go to rotary.org/our-programs/youth-exchanges/details.

Diary of an exchange year

Did you know?

► In 2018-19, **70 percent of exchanges were long term**, lasting a full academic year.

► 91 percent of Rotary districts are certified to participate in Rotary Youth Exchange, but **only 16 percent** of clubs send or host students.

► **5,768 Rotary clubs** participate in Rotary Youth Exchange.

Figures do not include information about the program in Germany.

In 2002-03, Lore Soria traveled from Ambato, Ecuador, to Ogallala, Nebraska, as a Rotary Youth Exchange student. Afterward, she returned home to Ecuador for college. On a visit to Nebraska for a friend's wedding, she met David Beckius. After dating long distance, the couple married; they have twin four-year-old boys, and Lore Beckius was 2019-20 president of the Rotary Club of Ogallala — the same club that hosted her 18 years ago. She shares here some highlights from her exchange year.

August

Today is the day. My mom cried all the way to the airport. I was crying too, but I gave her a hug, dried my tears, and went through security. When I got off the plane, my host family was waiting for me, holding a sign that read "Welcome home." My host mom's name is Michelle, and she has two daughters, Heide and Mallory. When we pulled up to their house, I was surprised at how big and how nice it is. I even have my own room and bathroom!

My host sisters and their friends asked me lots of questions. They don't know

"My host family took me into town. Front Street looks like something out of an old Western movie."

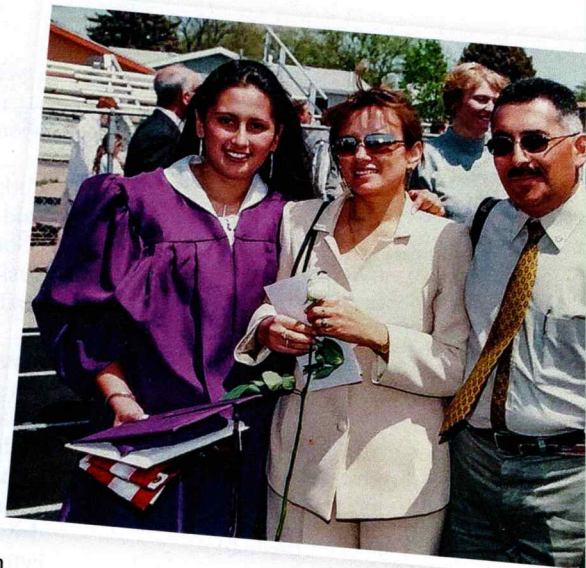
much about Ecuador. I told them we have volcanos and so much natural beauty. I'm using my pocket dictionary all the time. I don't understand any of the slang that Americans use, and their accent is so different from the British English I learned in school.

I went to a Rotary meeting and met my Youth Exchange adviser. I also visited my new school. I will take U.S. history, geography, English, chemistry, and math. I also picked a few electives. I can't believe all the fun classes they have here. We don't have choir or cooking or anything like that in Ecuador. My host family also took me into town. Front Street looks like something out of an old Western movie.

I started school today. I was so worried about what to wear. I've never gone to a school where I didn't have to wear a uniform. Mallory is a junior, and she drove me and Heide, who's a sophomore, to school. I was nervous, but the other students were nice. When they said hi, I kept leaning forward to give kisses — but they don't do that here. I'm learning to say, "Hey, what's up?" and give a little wave instead.

September

My host mom told me I should try out for the school play. That is something



A look back at the history of Rotary Youth Exchange

1927

A Rotarian in France writes to Rotary International and proposes an international youth exchange between children of Rotarians.

1928

The March issue of *The Rotarian* magazine reports on a youth exchange proposed by clubs in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, and Switzerland.

1939

District 107 (formerly Southern California) sets up an exchange with districts in Latin America.

1946

European exchanges resume after World War II ends.

1953

A youth exchange conference in Switzerland generates worldwide interest in the program.

1966

Rotary's Board of Directors conducts a survey of youth exchange activities being operated by clubs and districts worldwide.

1975

Rotary Youth Exchange is officially recognized as an activity of Rotary International after being formally adopted at the 1974 Council on Legislation. The decision designates Youth Exchange as a program to be administered at the regional level by Rotary districts and at the local level by Rotary clubs. The program continues to operate this way today and is active in 128 countries and geographical areas. About 9,000 students participate each year.

I would never have done at home. The play is called *A Service for Jeremy Wong*, and it's about the killing of a gay high school boy.

Today, a really cute and popular boy said, "Hey, what's up?" to me. I replied, "Good!" But I think that was wrong. I asked Mallory what to say so I'll be ready next time.

November

I'm getting into a routine. I have basketball practice after school. I go with my host sisters to all the volleyball games. On Friday and Saturday nights, we go "cruising." It's so much fun. We drive up and down Highway 30 and listen to music.

December

It's almost Christmas! It makes me a little homesick. Christmas is such an important time in Ecuador. I learned that I will switch host families on 23 December. I'm going to miss Mallory and Heide. The next family I'm staying with has three younger boys.

I went to the Catholic church here twice on Christmas Eve. It makes me feel better to be surrounded by familiar traditions. On Christmas morning, there were so many presents with my name on them under the tree. My new family is trying to make me feel at home, but I don't know them yet, so I feel a little awkward.

"We don't have prom in Ecuador, so this feels like a special American thing to experience."



January

I've become close to my new host mom. We go shopping together and get manicures. She always tells me how happy she is to have another girl in the house. And she is a really good cook. She's always baking something.

February

My host mom includes me in everything she does for the boys, like presents for Valentine's Day. I talk to my family in Ecuador about once a month. One thing I like about my high school is that everyone seems to get along. The kids ask me about Ecuador. Some want to learn the bad words in Spanish, and I did get in trouble for teaching them a few.

March

My English has gotten much better. I've even started dreaming in English. I'm so busy with speech competitions, choir, basketball, and tennis that it's hard to even have time to think about things back home in Ecuador.

April

I'm living out in the country now with my third host family, which has five girls, so it can be a little tough to get



time in the bathroom to get ready for school! I'm looking forward to going to prom next month. I'm going with a group of girls, and I already have a dress. We don't have prom in Ecuador, so this feels like a special American thing to experience.

It's a lot of fun living in this family with so many girls. I get along very well with their oldest daughter, who is a high school freshman. We go to the movies together and hang out.

I had so much fun at prom! We danced and danced. I felt like a movie star.

May

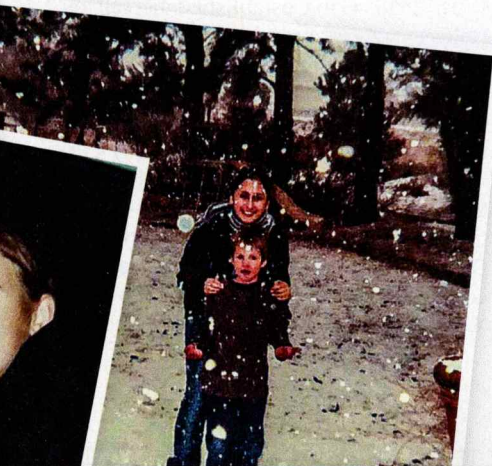
Graduation is here. My parents traveled to Nebraska for the ceremony. Even though our principal practiced saying my name, he still mispronounced it. But it was so exciting to get my diploma! He also gave me a little American flag.

July

We went to watch the Fourth of July fireworks, and the song "Proud to Be an American" gave me goosebumps. I go home this month. My exchange has helped me to grow up and be ready to live on my own. I am so proud that I was able to make it through one year by myself.

I'm home now, and it's weird to be back. My parents talk to me in Spanish, and I find myself accidentally answering them in English. My friend Serena came from Ogallala for a visit. We keep in touch online, and I can't wait to go back to visit. ■

Reconnect Week is 5-11 October. Each year, all around the world, Rotary members and alumni of programs such as Rotary Youth Exchange, RYLA, and Interact share their experiences, network with one another, and participate in projects together. Find out more at on.rotary.org/reconnectweek.



Coping with the unexpected: Rotary Youth Exchange and COVID-19

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect Rotary's Youth Exchange program in unprecedented ways. We talked about it with RI Director James Anthony "Tony" Black, who served as chair of the Youth Exchange Committee and as its director liaison.

Rotary Youth Exchange participants often have to cope with unexpected challenges. How have students, clubs, and districts been handling the pandemic?

The Rotary Youth Exchange community has done outstanding work keeping students and program volunteers engaged. We've seen students connecting virtually through video challenges and attending club meetings online. Virtual exchanges can serve as an engaging alternative to in-person exchanges, providing young people the opportunity to engage and collaborate with people from other cultures and communities through technology. Some districts are even planning virtual exchanges for 2020-21. Clubs and districts are working hard to keep students safe and connected with Rotary and their communities.

How did Rotary support students who had to come home early?

Returning home, even after a successful exchange, can be difficult for students and their families. Imagine the added challenges of returning home earlier than expected, and of experiencing reverse culture shock in the midst of a global pandemic. Rotary leaders recognized the need to provide students with additional emotional support and found innovative ways to do that.

For example, some districts arranged video calls so that students could maintain the relationships they had developed while on exchange, or set up group conference calls so that students could share what they experienced and provide support to one another. Some even arranged for mental health counselors to offer support to students.

What about the students who had to shelter in place while abroad?

For students who remained on exchange, the effect of COVID-19 on their experience was equally unexpected and challenging. But even without the typical social activities, districts found ways to keep students engaged, to help them practice their language skills, and to stay connected. Students even developed creative social media campaigns to promote safe social distancing in their host communities with the help of volunteers.

Is there any lesson from the past that could help chart the way forward for the Rotary Youth Exchange program in a world changed by COVID-19?

It's important to realize that this is not the first time that international exchange programs have been challenged by an international crisis, and most study abroad programs have historically rebounded very quickly. In the 2020-21 year, COVID-19 may close some doors temporarily, but we know that with any challenge comes great opportunity. A pause could provide a chance for clubs and districts to strengthen their programs and to find new, innovative ways to engage young people with Rotary. I have no doubt the program will come out of this challenge even stronger.

Rotary Youth Exchange needs you! Most districts are certified to run an exchange program, but only about 16 percent of clubs participate. If your club would like to support the program, contact your district leadership for guidance or email Rotary's support staff at youthexchange@rotary.org.