

# Connections

A publication of the Academic Year in America Program

*Connections* is a biannual newsletter comprised of memorable stories submitted by AYA students, Host Parents, and Local Coordinators across the USA. The articles and photos inside represent the unique cultural experiences enjoyed by AYA participants nationwide.



## Our Visit to South Korea

By John  
Host Parent, Michigan

I am writing this letter to share about the amazing trip to South Korea we had with our former exchange students. For the past three years we hosted three wonderful daughters from Korea: Helen, Ga Won and Rachel. Since all our students are from Korea, we decided to go visit them this past summer. It was amazing! Not only did we

get a chance to visit each of our exchange daughters again, we got a chance to experience their rich culture and traditions. We have so many great experiences to talk about and keep in our hearts forever, like eating good food, staying at the traditional house, the aquarium, hanging out at the mall, going to the palace, playing tennis, the water park, amusement parks, riding the subway, hanging out at a traditional market, and singing karaoke. We stayed in Seoul at a place called Seoul Guest House. Rachel and her family wanted to give us a picture of what it was like to live in Korea in

the past. We visited a beautiful island called Jeju Island, where Ga Won and her family took us to a place called Seongsanilchuibong (a water volcano) which we got a chance to climb. Still another great experience was when Helen and her father took us to a Buddhist temple called the Bulguksa Temple. I just want to thank each of our exchange daughters and their families for their friendship, love and generosity. We hope to meet again.

John, daughter Miranda and wife Cheryl with exchange daughter Helen, her parents and younger brother at the Bulguksa Temple

## My Life in Illinois

By Lukas

Student, Germany, Illinois

I am having a great year in America. When I arrived in the summer, everything was very exciting and new, another country with all the different people and language. But once I got to my new home in our little town in Illinois after all the flights and big cities I had seen, everyday life as an exchange student soon began and I got to know a lot of new people and to speak English better every day. The first day of school was a great one, I could talk to a lot of people who were very open and it was a great experience to have conversations in English. I started running Cross Country with my host brother and I really enjoy the American school spirit, especially at the football and basketball games or homecoming week where everybody is dressed in the school colors. We always have a dance team, band and cheerleaders to support our team on Friday nights. On the weekends we usually have a lot of church youth group activities like bowling, game nights or just watching a movie. I am really enjoying this first half of my year here in the USA. I already had a great time with my host family, in the high school, with new friends and I am looking forward to the second half!



## Sons from Around the World

By Becky  
Host Parent, North Carolina

My husband and I have a pretty amazing family! We're Mom and Dad to Dennis and Cody and "American Mom and Dad" to Niklas from Germany and Renan from Brazil. We never imagined a few years ago that we would have sons from around the world, living not only in our home, but also in our hearts!

We had never even thought about having an exchange student until a friend called one day and asked if we would consider hosting a young man from Germany. She knew our younger son, Cody, was adopted from Romania, and thought we might be interested in hosting a European student. Dennis was preparing to start law school and Cody was in middle school, playing every sport possible. This didn't seem like something we could do, but I finally agreed to read the young man's profile and soon we were meeting with Ginger Jeffcoat, our local AYA coordinator, to learn about hosting!

Niklas came for the fall semester in 2009, and quickly became our "middle son." Cody loved having a big brother at home again. When they discovered things they had in common, Cody would say, "It's a European thing, Mom!" The students at our school loved Niklas, where it was a pleasant surprise to discover he was a soccer star, leading our team to new records in goals and wins! He was a joy to have in our home. The only difficult part of Niklas' time with us was his departure. It was a sad and tearful goodbye, with promises to stay in touch. We did, and this summer Niklas returned to us for a month-long visit!

Having Niklas in our family was such a great experience, we knew we would host again. We contacted Ginger, who sent us profiles of boys she thought would fit into our family. It was easy to select Renan, with his sweet, happy attitude! After exchanging e-mails and Facebook messages with him for three months, we felt like we knew him even before he arrived. He is the wonderful young man we knew he would be! Renan has quickly settled into our home and our hearts. He's an excellent student, working hard to do his best at everything. He and Cody are the same age and do

many things together like playing school soccer, attending youth activities at church, and hanging out with friends. It's another wonderful experience for our school, our community and especially our family.

Renan arrived while Niklas was still visiting with us. It was amazing to see the three boys together, listening to them talk about their countries, asking questions, laughing and discovering all they have in common. I'm sure when Niklas and Renan decided to exchange to America, they never dreamed they would end up with brothers from all around the world.

It was sad saying goodbye to Niklas again, but we'll see him soon. Cody and I are traveling to Germany next summer! In a few years, we all plan to meet in Brazil to visit Renan. It's exciting to think about what the future holds for these young men. We're so thankful to have them in our family and to be a part of their lives!

Niklas, Cody, and Renan take a moment to pose on the football field



## News from Nebraska

*By Lucia  
Student, Germany, Nebraska*

I am staying in the USA for a half a year as an exchange student. It is strange to ride in the typical American school buses and feel the school spirit at an American high school which you only know from the movies, like "High School Musical." It is so great to come every morning in the school and see the lockers in the hallways, and the big gym, and so on! I'm Lucia, I'm 16 years old and I used to live in Germany until I arrived here in Nebraska. We flew with our organization AIFS to New York

City and stayed there for 3 great days! We saw a lot, including Rockefeller Center, Natural History Museum, and Times Square. The American High School is awesome! You can choose after school activities and you'll find a lot of friends through activities. I chose to play tennis and I like it very much, and I also found friends!

My host family and I have a great relationship. I have a sister who is older than me by 16 days, and two big brothers. They are great and we spend a lot of time together when we can, because we're all very busy with school activities and homework. I just want to say thank you so very much to my host family, for hosting me. You do a great job!

Thank you very much to AIFS and AYA and of course to my Local Coordinator Susan. If I have problems, she always helps me. The organization AIFS is really the best choice. They always help you if you need help and you can call them 24 hours a day. Finally I want to say thank you to my family in Germany. Thank you for the great lovely emails, packages and letters! Also thanks to my friends in Germany just for asking how I am. If you have the chance to go in a foreign country as an exchange student don't think too long about it. Just do it! You will like it!

I'm on the right with my big host sister Paige with caps and sweatshirts from the football team Nebraska Huskers. She and I have a great relationship and she is just like a big sister to me!



## Welcome to Texas

*By Nina  
Student, Poland, Texas*

Going to America for the whole year is the most interesting thing that I have ever done. My life in Texas is a lot different than life in Poland - and this is exactly what I wanted. American High School is a lot of fun. There are so many different activities going on that make me enjoy every day of it. I got very involved in some of them, such as Theater, Volleyball Team and German Club. My host family is amazing. Thanks to them, I have experienced the American way of life and become "Half Texan." I feel as if I was their own child which is very helpful when you leave your family for such a long time. I get along very well with my lovely host sister from Hungary and I got a chance to learn about her culture as well. The best part of my exchange program is that I have made a lot of friends with people not only from the United States but from all around the world. It is terrific that although all of the foreign exchange students are from different countries and our cultures are totally different, we still can get along because we share the same experience and can speak the same language. This is a great adventure which I am going to remember the rest of my life and I am sure that I will come back to America!

Me on the left wearing a traditional Texas mum and my friend from the drill team at the Homecoming Football Game!

## Friends (and Food!) in Italy and Macedonia

By Larry Townsend  
Local Coordinator, Arkansas

If you receive an invitation to visit former students in their native countries, you should certainly do it! My good friend Irma and I recently traveled from Arkansas to Italy and Macedonia at the invitation of three former students: Alberto from Italy and Aleksander and Hristijan from Macedonia. As Irma, a seasoned traveler, commented on our return: "This has been my best vacation ever!" Landing in Rome Sunday morning, we met Alberto and his parents Renato and Marina. After hugs, they whisked us off to their home and a welcome breakfast in the garden. I was very touched to meet Alberto's grandma, Lucia. When she saw me she raised her arms and said, "Larry, Larry, Larry!" She doesn't speak any English, but all she had heard when Alberto was with me in Arkansas was "Larry, this" and "Larry, that." We spent three beautiful days touring Rome and savoring the food, both homemade and at local restaurants. Renato owns a local trattoria serving up crab pasta and sirloin steak like we'd never tasted before – and Irma thought she grilled the best steaks! Our hosts were excellent tour guides who are proud of their beautiful ancient city. We toured the famous attractions of the past - Coliseum, Roman Forum, Circus Maximus, and St Peter's Basilica - but just as interesting was the opportunity to see the present. On a bridge over the Tiber River, we noticed several small metal locks left anonymously. Marina explained their relation to a popular Italian teen film "Three Meters Above the Sky" – local teens have adopted the custom of leaving these locks, scratched with their initials, conspicuously throughout the city. On Wednesday we drove north with a stop in the village of Siena before



catching a ferry to the family's vacation home on the island of Elba. On arrival we enjoyed a delicious grilled fish dinner prepared on the patio by friends and neighbors Renato E. and Germana. The following morning we strolled down to the harbor for a swim in the crystal clear Mediterranean and lunch on Renato E's yacht. A drive through the hills of Elba brought us to several villages, clean beaches and a spring fed fountain where a sign reads, "Napoleon drank here." After three fun filled days, we drove back to Rome to catch a flight to Skopje, Macedonia. We lunched with Aleksander, his mom Biljana, brother Viktor, and friends Danilo and Marko just arrived from Belgrade, Serbia. Our first venture was just outside the city at a man-made dam between mountains, a cool stop on hot summer days in Skopje. After a few days visiting the highlights of Skopje, including a huge colorfully lit statue of Alexander the Great in the city center, we drove two hours north to the resort town of Ohrid, the home of former student Hristijan and his parents Sonny and Beth. We stayed in the old part of the city overlooking beautiful Lake Ohrid, one of the deepest lakes in the world. Hristijan gave us a personal historic

tour of Ohrid's ancient amphitheater, walled fortress and restored churches. (A painting of St John's Church on the coast hangs in my living room in Arkansas, a gift from his parents when they visited several years ago.) The next day we visited the Bay of Bones, an ancient village built on pilings in the lake, and the Naum Monastery where we sampled rakia, a local drink containing 50% alcohol produced by the monks. We enjoyed a visit to the fresh water springs that feed Lake Ohrid before returning to old town for dinner. We spent one more evening on the town in Skopje before our morning departure back to Rome, a final dinner with Alberto's family, and another morning departure to Chicago and home. This truly was a vacation of a lifetime for Irma and me, and we encourage other AYA host parents to take advantage of the opportunity when invited by their former international students. Extend the cross cultural adventure by visiting your students in their native countries—by all means, just do it!

Awaiting a fine dinner at Popova in Macedonia: Larry's former student Hristijan, mom Biljana, Alek and Hristijan's sister Alexandra



## Halloween Happenings

By Hugh McMullen  
Local Coordinator, Florida

In early October I hosted a Halloween get together at my home. We had eight exchange students all together. Six different countries were represented. We started off with pumpkin carving at the pool area, swimming and then ended up at Busch Gardens for Howl-O-Scream. We had barely arrived at the park when a ghoul appeared and scared two of the girls out of their minds. We really had a fantastic time. All the kids were saying this was the best party they have been to. They were also asking when we will get together again. We are shooting for early December to celebrate the holidays.

Local Coordinator Hugh McMullen (back center) and students with their finished creations

# The FLEX & YES Experience



## Model UN in Pittsburgh

*By Fara*

*Student, Kazakhstan, Pennsylvania*

Have you ever heard about Model UN? It is a conference of the United Nations but for high school students. A month ago, I found out about University of Pittsburgh Model United Nations and decided I really wanted to do it. First I talked to my Government Class teacher Mr. Corey. He supported my idea. We made a list of students who would participate. After that we were registered. Then, on the 7th of November at University of Pittsburgh my group and I participated in International Model UN. It was amazing and I enjoyed it. Here are some pictures from conference day.

**Above:** Fara displays his pride in Model UN and the FLEX program!

**Right:** Fara and fellow Model UN students on conference day



The FLEX and YES grants provided by the Department of State enable students from all over the world to study, volunteer and experience America

## Visit to Community Center

By Ammara  
Student, Pakistan, New York

My host mom Theresa's brother has Down's syndrome, a developmental disability. On November 14, she arranged for us to visit the Steuben Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC) so that we would learn how the United States treats people with developmental disabilities. Kate Foss, Community Relations Associate Director, welcomed us with a presentation on the history of the ARC and a complete tour of the new facility. She explained that most of the money raised to build this new building came from local contributions. I was extremely happy to hear that the Steuben community helped a lot to collect the funds for this building.

On our tour, we met many clients working. I worked with people who were assigned to count shirts in boxes and then write the number on the box. Others were placing tags on products to be displayed in retailers like Wal-Mart. We also saw where they embroider and silk-screen shirts. After a nice lunch with the workers, we participated in a class for the clients on interviewing.

By watching and observing the clients/workers

in this organization, I learned that people with developmental disabilities have a big role in the U.S.A. They can contribute by working, providing them with a valuable place in a community. I concluded that we (Pakistanis and all the other Middle Easterners) should also make these kinds of strategies to serve these people, leading to the progress and development of a country. To



**Above:** Khaled, Majd and Ammara watch as an ARC client finishes a screen printing.

**Right:** Clockwise from left: Local Coordinator Theresa Rogers, Alyin from Turkey, Ammara, fellow student Alexis, Khaled from Egypt, Majd from Lebanon, and Theresa's son Patrick visited the Steuben ARC



end, I would like to thank Kate Foss, my agency members, AYA/AIFS and my host mom for bringing us there.

## Festival of Eid

By Saba  
Student, Pakistan, Montana

My Local Coordinator Marilyn Murchie is wonderful. She is so loving and cooperating. She listens whenever I want to talk and she helps me a lot in every matter. In September she arranged a trip to Glacier National Park for us and really we enjoyed it a lot. In my religion, Islam there is a festival after the holy month of Ramadan called Eid. Marilyn and I worked together in celebrating that event. She helped me a lot in introducing my culture to the community. We made a lot of food and had a big celebration. Marilyn is a very unique and special person and a source of inspiration for me.

Saba (center), her Local Coordinator Marilyn and fellow students celebrating the end of Ramadan with a big feast called Eid



This gorilla decided to pose with my students, and host mom Liz who is also becoming an LC. The gorilla was very entertaining—we probably watched him for an hour! Left to right: Toma, Carolina, Liz (host mom), Aleksandar, Rinora, and Andrea Jarak.

—Nancy Stubbs, Local Coordinator, Iowa



**Left:** Students and host parents dig into a delicious spread at Local Coordinator Jeanne Monte's orientation and welcome party in Florida

**Right:** Igor from Austria celebrates a victory with his Mississippi football team!





August orientation students at Battery Park in New York overlooking Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty!



My son Patrick (left) and our host kids Shyer from Bangladesh (right) and Imke from Germany (center) were honored this October by receiving a key to the city from the Chamber of Commerce of Hanover, Pennsylvania! – Glenda O'Regan, Local Coordinator, Pennsylvania

Student Mingyi shares her Chinese culture with a class of elementary students in Indiana. – Anita Senesac, Local Coordinator, Indiana



AYA Chinese students enjoying a day in Disneyland, California during summer orientation!



**Above:** From left to right: Mari from Germany, Rehab from Egypt, Local Coordinator Shirley Jackson from New Jersey, and Denise from Germany during a summer visit to the AYA office!



**Above:** Here is our family portrait. The kids are doing great and are enjoying the Thanksgiving holiday. Clockwise from left: Daniela from Germany, Michael, John, Local Coordinator Tina Simoes, Xi Chu from China, Elijah, Angela, and Zachary



**Left:** Chinese student Tingxiao gets her first experience preparing Thanksgiving dinner in the kitchen of her high school. Tingxiao and other volunteers helped provide dinner for about 250 people in her Wisconsin community.

**Below:** I'm in Florida and I'm having a wonderful year with nice friends and a really fun host family. This picture was taken on my friend's 16th birthday. It was a lot of fun - we all dressed up and made funny pictures (I'm the pirate on the left side). We also had fake snow and the party ended in a huge snow fight. It was one of the best evenings I had and I will always remember this day.

—Kathrin  
Student, Germany, Florida



I am the little teacup who turns into a young boy in the Beauty and the Beast musical play at my school!

—Shaqina  
(third from right), Student, Indonesia, Kansas



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## Attention AYA Students:

Do you want other AYA students to have a wonderful exchange year like you? You can **"Pass the Torch"** by helping AYA find loving Host Families for students arriving this August. You can even earn money for referring each family that agrees to host!

Simply tell us the names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of people you know who could be great hosts for an AYA exchange student. We will contact them about hosting. **You will earn \$100 for each family on your list who hosts a 2011 AYA student.**

Email your referrals to Stella Jacaruso at [sjacaruso@aifs.org](mailto:sjacaruso@aifs.org) or call her at 800.322.4678 ext. 5164