

**Chapter Six:
The Boldest Advantage: A Year-Long High School
Exchange**

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**The Most Recommended Exchange Program—
and Why It’s the Best**

**To travel is to discover that everyone is wrong about other
countries.**

Aldous Huxley

Most parents flash me a deer-in-the-headlights look when I mention sending high school students abroad for a year. For one thing, they can’t imagine being away from their son or daughter for that long. Also, they are reluctant to fix what doesn’t seem to be broken—their student seems reasonably happy just cruising through high school and they don’t want to rock the boat.

Once again, the biggest blockade is fego: parents are worried about their kids’ ability to deal with the experience, and may be even more worried about how *they* will handle the separation. Plus, they don’t want to be seen as an uncaring parent who isn’t bothered by sending their child to another continent for a year. Those whose identity revolves

around being a parent who does everything for their kids are the ones most likely to find the whole idea abhorrent—after all, who will *they* be if their son or daughter isn't there?

Sending your student abroad might be a big leap, but it makes all subsequent leaps seem like baby steps. That going-off-to-college day will be an absolute cakewalk by comparison, and you'll be one of the enviable parents who laughs at empty-nest syndrome. (Tip: It's way more fun than crying.)

I've had three tearful goodbyes with my daughters when they went abroad during high school (and many more weepy farewells since then) and I can assure you that the sadness and worry you feel as a parent will be completely overridden by the thrill of seeing your child become utterly transformed into a young adult with a heap of remarkable skills that they could never have gained by staying home with you.

Has your heart been warmed by watching your student make a winning goal, give an eloquent speech, or take a bow following a musical performance? Small potatoes, my friend. You will never be more proud of your student—or *yourself*—than you'll be when you see what they've become because of your gigantic (if heart-ripping) gift of allowing them to have an adventurous rite of passage all their own. They'll look different, know and love another culture, have dozens of friends from around the world, and be completely at ease navigating in a foreign land that would

drop you to your knees in a day. There's nothing more satisfying than watching your 17-year-old surpass you in terms of confidence and language skills.

But that's just *my* story. Here's one from Kelli Swanson Jaecks:

Bold Statement:

In March of her eighth grade year, my sweet, bubbly daughter came home with a name and number of some person who had substituted in her English class that day. She told the kids that the local Rotary Club was still looking for a few students to travel that very summer to South Africa and Sweden. Brea was very excited, and so were we. We made the call that evening, and within a month, both Brea (14) and our son, Keston (16) were signed up to travel independently abroad.

Brea was due to go to South Africa—alone—in three months' time. We threw ourselves into preparations, meetings, and research about how to get her there safely, obtain a visa and find out about the family that would be hosting her.

We met opposition from grandparents and friends, even her middle school principal, all voicing concerns about the dangers of South Africa: AIDS, the crime rate, and racial unrest. We could see the doubt and questioning of

our judgment as parents, even from those who didn't verbally express it. We had to continually justify our decision by citing the great track record of Rotary Youth Exchange and claiming what we know to be true: the only way this world will come to true peace is for people—especially youth—to travel the globe. We're a lot less likely to go to war with those who have opened their arms and homes to us, and we need a critical mass of individuals who've been embraced abroad and who share a deep connection with those in countries around the world.

Brea spent five weeks with a wonderful loving family living in a suburb of Johannesburg. Yes, she saw homes surrounded by high iron fences to keep out crime. She saw armed soldiers guarding cars in the local mall's parking lot and she saw poverty up close and personal. What could be wrong with exposing her to that? My husband and I fully believe in giving kids a chance to see the world as it is.

Our daughter came home lit up with the fire of travel and a new respect for other cultures. Her first words to us upon her return were, "I am going to go on the year-long exchange now!" And so, Brea spent her junior year of high school in a small rural town in central Brazil. It was a fantastic experience for her.

My advice: That year, while she was gone and our son was in college, I started my master's degree program. This kept me too busy to be worried about Brea and allowed me to fulfill a personal goal. It turned out to be a great plan for everyone!

When Brea came home, she was a very independent, confident, world-aware young woman. The positives of international travel for young people far outweigh any negatives. Adjusting to change, sometimes filled with pain and conflict, is a necessary and exciting task for both the student and the parents. I am very proud of Brea and know that she is becoming an engaged and positive force for her society and the world. She is truly a global citizen.

I'm not going to sugarcoat this: it's hard to send your child away for a year. But though we long to keep our kids close, our grand parental sacrifice will give them a tremendous long-term advantage. Yes, the airport scene is sad, but within a month, most parents have recovered beautifully from their initial what-have-we-done stage. And don't think it's only the moms who get emotional—Tom was a mess the week we said goodbye to Taeko when she left for her year in Chile. Here's the way he describes it:

I never really thought about how I would feel when our oldest daughter, Taeko, left on her Rotary exchange to Chile. Having been an exchange student myself, I was excited for her to experience some of the same things that I had. But the day before she left, I was physically ill and could barely get out of bed, something that is very rare for me. At the time, I insisted that it had nothing to do with emotions, but looking back on it (and having experienced the same thing when we sent two more daughters abroad) I am certain that it did.

We adjusted to having one less child in the house, but we thought of Taeko often and were captivated by the postcards, letters and emails that started arriving after her first month away. The growth in her maturity was obvious and astounding.

Going to pick up Taeko at the airport after her year abroad was one of the most gratifying experiences of my life. The excitement started three months before she came home, and grew and grew. Within minutes of reuniting with her, we could see that she seemed several years older than when she'd left. Getting reacquainted was an incredible opportunity to shift from a parent/kid relationship to a peer/peer relationship. It was a dramatic but very sweet and satisfying transition.

I felt that my year of worry when she was gone as a high school junior was more than compensated for by the fact that she was completely capable of handling anything during her college years. Having our child

come home a strong young adult able to take on the world without our help was a greater reward than any possible combination of grades, test scores, trophies, acceptances or achievements I can imagine.

I could fill an entire chapter with testimonials from parents, but they'd all sound similar: "It was difficult at times, but it turned out to be an extremely important year for our son/daughter and we're so grateful that we decided to send him/her abroad." Even the hardships—no, *especiallly* the hardships—are likely to be exceptional learning opportunities for everyone. Still, it helps to know what to expect, and there are **two key points** you need to understand in order to make the most of the exchange experience:

■ **No matter what program you choose, you must accept that every student will have a different experience, and in most cases, it will not be an easy one.** The program coordinators, the destination, the host parents, the school situation, the student's personality and a million other details come together to create the exchange experience. No program can guarantee that everything will go perfectly, and you should run away from anyone promising a silky smooth ride. Be realistic and expect bumps. Count on the fact that, at times, your student will whine and/or cry and you as a parent will lose sleep and/or hair. It helps to remember that you've already lost a lot of sleep/hair worrying about your student over the years, and that's likely to continue no matter where

your son or daughter may be. Even in the most ideal situations—those in which the student is fully and lovingly supported every step of the way—the year will be challenging. That’s the point!

The one thing most likely to sabotage a student’s exchange is frequent emails/calls from parents who express their sadness and concern. Those who *really* care about their kids will give them room and time to settle in without adding another layer of angst by flooding them with I-miss-you messages. In fact, the best exchange programs have a 30-day rule: no phone or email contact during the first month after the initial I’m-here-and-I’m-fine phone call. One wise and good-natured mother I know said it helped her to think of it as a *full-body* exchange—doing anything that would keep her daughter’s head and heart back home while the rest of her was abroad would just be “messy for everyone.” Sending kids abroad requires a bit of tough love—and a much bigger chunk of self-control.

Smart Move: Wise parents understand that parenting isn’t about simply keeping kids happy—it’s about giving them opportunities to be truly challenged in order to develop fully as confident and compassionate young adults.

Those who surpass the milk-and-cookies role give their children a chance to discover their potential, and the rewards can be spectacular for both kids and parents. For one thing, if you do it right, your son or

daughter will think you are the *greatest parent alive* for giving them the freedom to experience life abroad at this age. This is precisely what will get you through the not-so-great moments.

■ **Do not expect a year-long exchange to be focused on academics.** In most cases, you will have no control over your student's school situation—and that's fine. Some students end up in very demanding schools, and others will find that school is either nearly impossible due to the language barrier or completely lacking in rigor or organization (teachers not showing up, students not participating, etc.) Both extremes—and anything in between, frankly—can be very frustrating, but it's all part of the process.

Savvy parents recognize that students on exchange develop the Triple C qualities—*confidence, critical thinking* and *compassion*—that will take them *way* beyond their classmates who are writing term papers back home. Sure, they might be missing AP English or Pre-Calculus, but these courses can't come close to offering the same benefits as grappling with the personal issues that crop up during a year abroad.

Convinced enough to learn more? Well, here's the first wall you're likely to face: **How to pick the right exchange organization.**

Many parents who recognize the benefits of sending their student abroad get bogged down once they begin looking at the options. There

are so many programs that it's easy to become overwhelmed by the research process and give up on the idea altogether. The hardest part is choosing a program without having some kind of personal connection to it. Perhaps you don't know anyone who has sent their son or daughter abroad for a year, and without a recommendation from someone you know and trust, you're hesitant to take the next step.

Please allow me to make this part a little easier for you.

There are literally hundreds of exchange programs out there, but just a handful that consistently offer high school students great opportunities to spend a year living in another country with host families. Back in Chapter Five, you read about Emily's participation in the **AFS** program. AFS was founded in 1914 as the American Field Service, an organization dedicated to transporting wounded soldiers. Now, AFS is a leader in intercultural learning and offers international exchange programs in over 50 countries around the world through its network of more than 30,000 active volunteers. More than 325,000 individuals have benefited from the experience of studying abroad through AFS. (www.afs.org)

Another excellent program is **Youth For Understanding** (www.yfu.org), which began very humbly in the United States in 1951. At that time, an American minister proposed to church leaders that teenagers from war-torn Germany be brought to the US to live with a

family and attend high school for a year in an effort to heal the wounds of World War II. Since then, YFU has grown into a network of over 50 partner organizations that has offered exchanges to approximately 200,000 students around the world

If you're considering sending your student abroad for a summer, a semester or a year, AFS and YFU are excellent options, and there are many other organizations creating wonderful exchange opportunities for students.

But I'm going to focus on only one. I have my own personal reasons for recommending it, but even if I didn't, I'd pick **Rotary International's** (www.rotary.org) program over all others, hands down.

Four big reasons:

► Rotary International's Youth Exchange program is organized and supported by **an enormous network of volunteers around the globe**. Rotary is the largest organization offering cultural exchange programs for high school students, and because there are **over 1.2 million Rotarians in 32,000 clubs in over 200 countries**, there's likely to be a Rotary Club member nearby and ready to help your student anywhere in the world they happen to be—including airports, clinics and government offices.

► The Rotary International Youth Exchange (RYE) program offers an **unmatchable level of support to families and students**. In many cases, the local Rotary Club will offer activities for months prior to

departure (described as the “outbound” period), during the exchange itself (“inbound”), and even after the student’s return to their home country (the “rebound” period). Though most exchange organizations require some kind of group orientation prior to departure, those with only one office for each region or country are not equipped to provide the ongoing support that the Rotary Club volunteers offer right in the student’s home district. Many Rotary Youth Exchange students attend numerous events—from lunch meetings to long recreational weekends and excursions with many other students—before, during and after their exchange. For this reason, the Rotary experience is sometimes referred to as “the three-year exchange.”

► Rotary International offers its **exchange programs at a considerably lower price than most other organizations.** Though it varies widely depending on each local Rotary Club and the hosting club in the destination country, on average, families pay no more than \$4,000 for the full-year program, *including* airfare and visa expenses. (Other programs range from \$8,000 to \$12,000 for the year, with some organizations charging \$20,000 or more.) In addition, many clubs offer scholarships that cover most costs, and the majority of RYE students receive a monthly stipend (generally between \$50 to \$100) to help with basic daily expenses such as extra school supplies or activities.

► Rotary International **is committed to humanitarian work on both a local and a global scale.** Thanks to Rotary and its partners, *two*

billion children have been immunized against polio, five million have been spared disability, and over 250,000 deaths from polio have been prevented. Through Rotary programs, hundreds of thousands of committed individuals from around the world are studying conflict resolution, earning scholarships for international study, traveling on cultural exchanges, and helping their communities through service projects of all kinds.

There are two key differences between the application process for Rotary and the ones used by most other programs:

- 1) **It's very local and personal.** Instead of sending application materials and a deposit check to a regional or national organization office, each student applies directly through the Rotary Club in their own community and has face-to-face interviews with local members.
- 2) **There is a fairly long lead time.** In order to go abroad their junior year of high school, students should apply to their local Rotary Club during early fall of their sophomore year. Many students interested in going on exchange find out about the Rotary program too late to apply. Best bet: check in with your local Rotary Club during your student's *freshman* year, but remember

that students can apply even as seniors to go abroad after graduation (they can't be older than 19 during their exchange).

Not every Rotary Club sponsors exchange students, and some do so only every few years. We ended up going through three different Rotary Clubs (all within ten miles of our home) in order to get our daughters sponsored. Some clubs are really gung-ho about the exchange program and others focus on different projects. Look for a club that is very active and excited about helping your student have their best exchange experience. Clubs also vary in terms of the sponsorship amount. We paid less than \$1,000 per year above the cost of the airfare and visa, but your local club might require a greater or lesser financial contribution.

What nobody tells you: Parents of Rotary Youth Exchange students (especially those like us who have sent several kids abroad) share a wink and a grin because we know that sending our sons and daughters off on an exchange can actually *save us money* while giving them the most amazing year of their lives. It's true. Consider this: their food and other daily expenses are covered, and we're not paying for their summer camps, activity fees, gas, car insurance, prom dresses or athletic shoes. If your kid goes to private school, you'll save thousands of dollars on that alone. Of course, all bets are off if you send your son or daughter to Europe with a credit card. (ATM/debit cards are definitely

the way to go, and expenses—not to mention shopping—in pricier countries will add to your year-end tally.)

Full disclosure: Tom and I have never been members of Rotary, nor has anyone in our families. However, we're grateful to Rotary for a number of reasons.

When I was in high school, I received a \$500 Rotary Foundation scholarship from the club near my town. After college, I was hired to teach English in rural Japan at a group of schools owned by Grif Frost, a young man who'd been born and raised in Oregon. Grif had spent a year in France during high school as a Rotary Youth Exchange student, and after returning home for his senior year, fell in love with Noriko Nomura, an RYE student from Japan who lived with his family for a few months. Eventually, they got married, and the couple and their young children were living in Noriko's hometown on the northern tip of Honshu, where they had established English schools in four local cities.

Rotary International is the world's first service club organization. Rotary Clubs are nonpolitical, nonreligious, and open to all cultures, races, and creeds. Rotary's main objective is service — in the community, in the workplace, and throughout the world.

At first, I was the only single American teaching English within a hundred miles or more. That changed three months later, when Grif's brother, Tom, arrived. Tom and I became teaching partners, spending 16 hours a day working side by side and hitting the road together three days a week to astound kindergarten students and entertain adults with our physical and fast-paced Dynamic English classes all over the area.

Growing up in small Oregon agricultural towns near each other and spending time in India (Tom as a Rotary Youth Exchange student when he was 16, me as a senior in college on a year-long Pacific Rim trip through the University of Puget Sound) gave us a lot of common ground. You can guess the rest: we fell in love, got married, and lived happily ever after.

Rotary has been a consistent and enriching part of our lives ever since.

► Shortly after we moved back to Oregon from Japan, Tom's host brothers from India moved to the US to earn their graduate degrees. His host brother lives about ten minutes from our former Portland home.

► A few years later, Tom and I decided to take a three-month sabbatical in order to return to India to spend time with his former host families there. It changed our family forever. (More on that in Chapter Eight.)

► We hosted Rotary Youth Exchange students while our girls were on their exchanges.

▶ When we lived in Mexico, our daughter, Tara, became good friends with Rotary Youth Exchange students from several countries.

▶ When we decided to leave Mexico, we let Talya pick the next destination since she hadn't had a chance to go on her own Rotary Youth Exchange.

▶ In Buenos Aires, her best friend was a girl from Wyoming who spent her junior year in Argentina on a Rotary Youth Exchange and returned to attend college there.

That's a long way of saying that I'm a pretty big fan of Rotary in general and the Rotary Youth Exchange program in particular. However, that doesn't mean my reasons for recommending it are clouded by my personal experience. I cheerfully encourage you to do your own research, but you won't find a more comprehensive support program or more dedicated volunteers around the world who are committed to offering affordable intercultural exchange opportunities to students from all backgrounds.

I know what you're thinking: "Gee, I'm not sure about this. Isn't it good enough to send my student on a semester abroad during his junior year of college? Why not keep him here at home until he graduates from high school?"

Get ready for some stories.

Later in this chapter, you'll learn why the *timing* of this experience is extremely critical and how sending your son or daughter on a year-

long exchange during (or right after) high school could be ***the most important parenting decision you ever make***. But right now, let's take a look at a few vignettes from the exchange students themselves.

I think you'll find them rather inspiring.

Old School: thinking of the Rotary Club as a group of business owners and city officials who have weekly lunches with local speakers in your community.

Bold School: thinking of the Rotary Club as an enormous network of over a million members in 200+ countries focusing on global health, conflict resolution, and exceptional intercultural exchange experiences.

“The Most Amazing Year of My Life”:

Stories From Returnees

The longest journey of any person is the journey inward.

Dag Hammarskjold

Whether students choose to go abroad through Rotary, AFS, YFU or any of a number of organizations, they all share similar stories and

will say they feel an immediate affinity with any former exchange student they meet.

I've had the privilege of interviewing over 100 former exchange students, and while I don't pretend that this was an exhaustive study, the examples in this chapter are fairly representative. There are sure to be those who didn't go to college, didn't find work with an international tint or never traveled again—but I didn't come across any of them. Despite the incredible range of experiences they shared, nearly every returnee expressed the following:

- **My year abroad was extremely challenging at times.**
- **I learned so much about myself and the world.**
- **I made friendships that remain among the most important relationships in my life.**
- **My year abroad changed me profoundly as a person.**
- **It was the most intense year of my life, I would certainly choose to do it again and I recommend it to every young person I know.**

But these statements alone can't begin to convey the enormity of the impact on those involved nor the richness of the experiences that these students can describe in intricate detail even many years later. In this section, I offer thumbnail sketches from former exchange students. I have included *only* Rotary returnees, not to play favorites but to eliminate differences due to the program itself while revealing the wide range of experiences possible for students within a given framework.

Talk about advanced placement. Remember Katie, our winning candidate for the German job in Chapter Two? You're about to meet others like her, and you may recognize some recurring themes. To avoid repetition, I have removed references to the fact that many students managed to "CLEP out" (via the College-Level Examination Program) of the requirements for the language they learned while abroad, leading them to get an easy head start on a foreign language major or minor. (Teal, our third daughter, earned a Spanish major by taking only *one* Spanish course at her final university, thanks to her year studying in Argentina—and the stellar transfer techniques you'll learn in the next chapter.) This is a clear example of the advantage of studying abroad during or right after high school, but you'll see in these stories that an exchange can be a year that keeps on giving in many ways.

Lisa Barnes

Hometown: Waterville, New York

Destination: Lecco, Italy

Year: '97-'98 (after high school graduation)

I tell people that my exchange was the greatest year of my life, which started with the worst three months of my life. I wanted to leave Italy after the first month, but thankfully, I didn't. If there had been a plane waiting to fly me home that first month, I would have been on it, but by the end of my exchange, I was in love, singing pretty successfully in a band, and I was talking with my dad about moving to Italy permanently and changing my citizenship!

When I first learned about my destination, I was upset that I wasn't going to be living in a big city like Milan. I wanted to have that easy out of being able to find people who could speak English, and I hoped to be able to brag to my friends about the party life I would be living. Instead, I ended up in the middle of the mountains in a town where goats frequently crossed the road. As a result of being more isolated, I was immersed in the language and became fluent. I remain in constant contact with my many Italian friends.

I had deferred my enrollment to Ithaca College in order to go on my exchange, and my time abroad definitely changed my university experience. I was much more focused on my studies, I worked as an Italian tutor, was a TA for the Italian department, and earned a minor in Italian in addition to my major in corporate communications/advertising. I have used my language skills in several positions with both American and Italian companies.

The greatest lesson I learned as an exchange student is that I can make it through anything by believing in myself. My experience in Italy really allowed me to set high goals in life. I think every American teenager should be required to spend one year abroad.

Kati Proctor

Hometown: Racine, Wisconsin

Destination: Merlo, Argentina

Year: '03-'04 (junior year of high school)

When I came back from my exchange, I didn't really understand that getting into college was something that one stressed about. I was amazed that some of my friends had people helping them write entrance essays. Heck, I wouldn't even let my mother look at mine!

I meant everything I wrote in my essays, whereas I felt like some kids just BS what they think will get them in. It was definitely a plus to be able to say that I had lived in a foreign country for 11 months where I didn't know the language to begin with and stayed with a family and went to a local high school!

I was accepted at several good schools, and selected the University of Chicago, where I am majoring in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. My main emphasis is on Armenian, and I spent several months as an intern at the US Embassy in Yerevan, Armenia during the conflict in neighboring Georgia. My work in the consular office turned out to be quite exciting: I assisted in the evacuation of American citizens from Georgia, calling hotels to locate people and helping Americans who had to leave home quickly without their passports. I held the elevator door for the president of Armenia, had a chance to see the prime minister during his visit, did a presentation for "American Corner" on college life in the US, and have attended meetings and events at which I represented the embassy.

My exchange opened up the world to me and allowed me to see that I have endless opportunities to explore new places and study other cultures.

Therese Enders

Hometown: Grand Rapids, Michigan

Destination: Kaliningrad, Russia

Year: '04-'05 (after high school graduation)

True confession: my year in Russia was the worst year of my life—but I would choose to do it all again because it was the most valuable experience I've ever had. I was able to find out who I really was when taken entirely out of context – away from my friends, family, job, church, and normal social setting. I realized that at my worst, I could be incredibly lazy and indifferent. I learned that I needed to be responsible for my own happiness.

I had only one host family, and they were nice people but they treated me like I was about twelve. Ultimately, I learned to balance consideration for their wishes with my own sanity by doing little things like sneaking out in my Birkenstocks (which were forbidden due to an old wives' tale about bare toes and infertility) on nice days. There were no other exchange students anywhere near me; I did not take a single trip with other students or attend a conference, but the upside is that I did come home pretty fluent in Russian.

I was extremely glad I used my exchange as a gap year before entering Michigan State University. While other students were freaking out about being away from home for a month, I was excited to be so close! My

exchange definitely shows up in my life: I'm majoring in both Russian and international relations, and I spent a summer interning for a state representative. (I was told that it was my experience abroad that made me the top candidate for the position.) I've especially enjoyed leading the international student orientation at MSU—I know what it's like to be alone in a new country, and I want to help others the same way that others helped me.

Recently, I spent a semester in the Czech Republic and had that “best experience of my life” that I was looking for when I went to Russia. Having been to Russia first made that experience all the sweeter; three months was like a vacation compared to a full-year exchange!

My year abroad was the hardest and most rewarding thing I've ever done academically, spiritually, and emotionally. My advice is to just go and let it be what it is but also be your own advocate. I highly recommend the Rotary program—they were generous in countless ways. I paid for my plane ticket and visa and that was about it. All things considered, it was the deal of a lifetime.

Adam Young-Valdovinos

Hometown: Canby, Oregon

Destination: Niigata, Japan

Year: '04-'05 (junior year of high school)

My exchange in Japan turned me into a leader. I established a successful community service club that brought together a diverse group of individuals. I decided that if I could do that in a culture that wasn't my own, there shouldn't be any reason I couldn't do it in my own country.

Living in Japan inspired me to view the world from a different perspective, and I believe that is why I was accepted by so many excellent universities. My SATs and ACTs were egregious by Ivy League standards (except for my Japanese SAT II), I never took a single AP course, and although I was valedictorian, it wasn't that impressive coming from Canby High School. I wasn't on academic overdrive my senior year, but I did pour myself into my extracurricular activities, and I think that Yale and the other schools viewed my passion and confidence favorably.

After my freshman year at Yale, I took a year off to live in South Korea, where I studied the language (my sixth), did volunteer work, conducted research, performed in a musical, and worked as a disc jockey for an international radio station. Now, I'm in Beijing on a fellowship to spend a

year studying with an intellectual community of about ten Yale students, ten Beida students and eight Yale professors.

I don't know what the future will bring—I have learned to be very flexible. Life is a long hallway with all sorts of doors and windows, and if one opens up, I will probably jump in with no hesitation or regrets. Wherever I go, I intend to use all of my gifts and skills to be of service and to continue learning.

Erin Hensley

Hometown: Tulsa, Oklahoma

Destination: Frauenfeld, Switzerland

Year: '04-'05 (junior year of high school)

My exchange literally defines who I am. It's one of the first things I share about myself in any kind of "get to know you" conversation. I grew up and gained so much from that experience that I cannot imagine the kind of person I would be without it.

I raised money for my exchange by sending letters to everyone I knew telling them about what I was doing and asking if they'd like to help me. Because of that and a little from my family, I had enough to go.

I got to travel a lot during my exchange! I met some of my relatives in Germany, went to Paris with my first host family, went to Tuscany with my friend's host family, went on lots of ski trips with various Rotary members and my school friends, and even went on a trip to South Africa with my last host family, followed by a three-week Rotary Euro tour! I felt so lucky to see incredible places I never imagined I would visit.

I'm a student at Grace University in Nebraska, and after completing a summer internship in Switzerland, I am now spending my junior year in Austria improving my German and studying business. My world has expanded dramatically because of my exchange.

Alaina Zulli

Hometown: Riverhead, New York

Destination: Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine

Year: '97-'98 (junior year of high school)

Around the fourth month of my exchange, I fell into a period of deep homesickness that I had been sure I would not succumb to. I am so glad that my parents made me stick it out—the last three months were the best time of my life! It was spring, I knew the language, I had wonderful friends (who remain my best friends today), drank in everything I could and took beautiful photographs that I still treasure.

I was the only exchange student in the country, which had only recently gained independence from the USSR, so I was very isolated. I spent a lot of time walking around the city and speaking with people on the street. That's how I learned Ukrainian.

Living with new families is hard. I rebelled when they insisted that I wear two coats and three pairs of socks even in spring, but after much push and pull, I began to soften. I think that my experience living with three very different families ultimately made it easier for me to live with my partner and have a happy marriage.

I was on a high for the first year after my return. Having been an extremely shy and lonely girl before I left, I astounded my classmates and family with my new confidence and was a sort of celebrity in my high school. I even had my first boyfriend. Most important was the fact that I valued myself. I'd done something special and brave. My exchange dramatically improved both my self-esteem and my ability to communicate with all kinds of people.

As a costume historian finishing grad school at NYU, I can see how my year abroad has shaped my work in important ways. I think of myself foremost as a sociologist (albeit, one whose work is based primarily on clothing), and I feel that I developed a deeper understanding of human

nature from my year abroad. I have always been interested in design, but I think I would have chosen a less sociological focus had I not had that cultural experience.

I returned to Ivano-Frankivsk recently, and it was just as beautiful as I remembered it. Leaving home in high school ultimately made coming back and living in my country a richer experience.

Alyssa Lanz

Hometown: Commack, New York

Destination: Tepic, Mexico

Year: '03-'04 (junior year of high school)

I had a fantastic year in Mexico, and continued to learn so much about myself after I came back home. Adjusting to high school in New York was difficult. I felt that my exchange made me grow up an extra five years rather than one. I did not want to get stuck in my old world where Coach bags and designer jeans were all the rage. I had a new outlook on life and on what mattered most.

There is a part of my life that will never come back again and can never be fully understood by those around me. I'll play my Mexican banda music or watch my Mexican telenovelas and get an eye roll or a "close your door." I

wasn't prepared for the fact that I would have to leave some of my heart and a year of my life in Mexico forever.

I got a scholarship to attend St. Joseph's College. Though I'd always planned to be a teacher, after my exchange, I really wanted to get involved in humanitarian work. I'm majoring in Spanish and political science and, thanks to a need-based Gilman International Scholarship, I am currently studying Arabic at the American University in Cairo, Egypt. My experience in Mexico taught me that I should never let fear become an obstacle, and I am excited to learn more about this fascinating culture.

Don Miller

Hometown: Amarillo, Texas

Destination: Liege, Belgium

Year: '91-'92 (senior year of high school)

My friends in high school thought I was crazy to miss senior year, but I had the best experience I could have hoped for. I made friends with people from all over the world and learned so much. Invaluable is how I would categorize life with a host family. They even came to my wedding 16 years later!

My exchange in Belgium changed my educational path completely. I started off in the college of business administration at the University of Colorado, then transferred to the University of Texas where I majored in French, Italian and Spanish with a minor in Portuguese. I currently speak six languages fluently and love using each one as often as possible.

While in college, I put together my own study abroad program that enabled me to spend a year studying archaeology in Italy. After graduation, I did law school at UT Austin, which has a dual program with Université de Paris X, so I have law degrees in both countries. I've spent the last few years living in Paris, where my practice focuses on cross-border mergers and acquisitions.

I do not want to be trite about the overall impact a year of traveling, meeting new people and learning can have on a teenager. I left an awkward kid and returned a well-rounded...perhaps not a man but an individual. Instead of being wrapped up in whether or not I was with the "right" crowd, I was able to get to know people without all of the superficialities associated with high school.

I would not change a single thing about that year. My advice to anyone thinking about it is to go. The people you meet and the adventures you will have are like cramming four years of positive high school experiences into one year.

Jessica Brams-Miller

Hometown: Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Destination: Lisieux, France

Year: '97-'98 (after high school graduation)

My time abroad helped to mold me as a person. I was a little bit of a brat when I left, and when I came back, I had learned how to adapt to situations more quickly, be a better student, and accept people for what they are. I learned a lot about concentration and studying, which helped me go from a B student in high school to having straight As a couple of times in college, and eventually I graduated with high honors from Lehigh University.

My exchange quite literally opened my eyes to my future: I became passionate about architecture. I majored in architecture and voice performance at Lehigh and went on to get a master's in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania School of Design. I spent the spring semester of my sophomore year in Vicenza, Italy, traveled to Ireland, England, Russia, Israel, Germany, and Switzerland, and returned to Paris as a teaching assistant with my master's program. The more I travel, the more I marvel at the impact my exchange has had on my life.

Rachel Lewis

Hometown: Kamiah, Idaho

Destination: Grindsted, Denmark

Year: '00-'01 (senior year of high school)

I come from a logging town of 1,200 people in rural Idaho, far from any city, and international travel had always seemed like a remote and exotic thing. I absolutely would not have had this opportunity had it not been for the financial support that Rotary provided.

I was the first exchange student ever to go from my high school, so there was no precedent to receive credit for any classes I took while studying abroad, and I graduated a year later than my classmates. Despite this, the experience was absolutely worth it!

After I returned, I attended Washington State University and graduated from their business department and the Honors College with a degree in business administration and marketing. Now, I live in Seattle and work for a global independent risk consulting company.

I would advise anyone thinking about studying abroad to go for it despite any delay it may have in your “official” education. The experience that I had abroad helped me to gain the personal independence and maturity needed to excel when I returned from the program—in college, in work, and in life.

Philip Storey

Hometown: Houston, Texas

Destination: Rio Tercero, Argentina

Year: '01-'02 (after high school graduation)

During my senior year of high school, I decided that I wanted to spend a year abroad before going to college in order to learn Spanish and see what another culture was like. I was student body president and valedictorian of my high school and the only student in my class that didn't go straight to college. Nobody understood what I was doing! However, I had learned that I could defer my full scholarship to Vanderbilt University, so I decided to just go for it.

Armed only with a cowboy hat and a grin, I stepped off the plane in Rio Tercero. On my first day of class, I introduced myself as a Rotary Youth Exchange student to the entire student body through a reverberating microphone. My sincerity was met with universal laughter, as the students found my poor Spanish and American accent hilarious. While I felt hopelessly lost at the beginning of my exchange, I gradually became part of the community and was very close to my soccer team, friends, and family. By the end of the year, I was no longer Philip, the American, but "Fee-leep, un Argentino más"—one more Argentine.

When I entered college a few months after returning from South America, all things lingual and international fascinated me. I was torn between the biomedical engineering major I had always planned on and the cultural path I found so enthralling. I chose to pursue both programs, which required doing intensive science semesters and summer school so that I could also study abroad in Germany, France, Spain and China. I graduated Phi Beta Kappa and received honors in the Spanish department for writing a thesis on the health status of Latinos in the United States and the role of language in the doctor/patient relationship.

After finishing college, I received a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship, which allowed me to study at the University of Sydney in Australia and earn a master's in international public health. I then went on to study French in Senegal, West Africa as a last hurrah before beginning medical school at Johns Hopkins University. I have absolutely no doubt that my youth exchange and subsequent experiences made me a much stronger candidate for scholarships and medical school placement.

Since 2001, I have lived a combined four years abroad, traveled to over 60 nations, studied on six continents, learned to speak five languages, and made friends all over the world that I will have until the day I die. I am now beginning a career in medicine with the hope of impacting

international health and serving some of the people that I have met in my travels.

Going on exchange was the single best decision I have ever made.

It's clear that a year-long high school exchange can affect your student positively and dramatically for *the rest of his or her life*. In the next section, you'll learn about the distinct advantages of sending your student abroad in high school rather than waiting until the traditional junior year of college.

Old School: worrying that a year-long exchange during (or right after) high school will put students *behind* their peers.

Bold School: knowing that a year-long exchange can send students far *beyond* their peers.

Why Timing Is Everything

It has been my observation that most people get ahead during the time that others waste time.

Henry Ford

When children are very young, their brains are aflame. Our desire to help our infants and toddlers fully develop their frontal lobes prompts extravagant purchases of educational toys and enrollment in all kinds of preschool programs. We expose them to a rich array of sensory experiences and social situations because we are completely committed to giving them every opportunity to absorb the world around them.

So, it's strange that we don't put as much stock in a later but equally important five-year stage of life: when our kids are between the ages of fifteen and twenty. After all, it is during this stage that our adolescents develop the skills they need to become adults. The brain development of this period will affect our students for far longer than the decade of childhood they were preparing for as preschoolers.

For all the effort we put into the first five years of life, we tend to wind down as our kids reach high school, expecting that their brain development—in all its depth, breadth, speed and glory—will be assured as long as they show up in class and maybe sign up for a few activities.

School. Club meetings. Practices. Part-time jobs.

These are the magic beans we're throwing at our kids at a critical period of their development? That sucking sound you hear is your student's brain crying out for *more*.

Just as young children blossom when given a chance to play with their sense of discovery, adolescents thrive when given a chance to play with their brain plasticity. Late adolescence brings with it some very special gifts—but they're not always the ones we like to open. Students at around age fifteen develop an increased ability to rationalize and argue; they begin to recognize life's inconsistencies. More annoying: kids begin to focus their new skills of analysis on their parents' not-so-logical ideas and rules—and they're *good* at it.

Fun for everyone.

But don't blame your student. It's just that his brain is engaged in the process of playing a new kind of assessment game. At this age, our kids develop their own radar for hypocrisy and explore the razor-sharp edges of cynicism. Their sense of humor can swing wildly from childlike silliness to dark satire. We know that high school is marked by gossip and an overall cynicism that can be both cruel and contagious, but what we don't see is the underlying reason—and our role in perpetuating the conditions that keep our kids' high school experiences so much like the teen movies they watch.

Our kids' brains are ravenous for content that will lend itself to analysis, and yet we're sticking them in a world that is so limited that

they are reduced to examining hairstyles and hook-ups instead of more challenging fare. Instead of analyzing culture, politics or world affairs on a daily basis, they're prognosticating about prom dates. They zero in on the fit of their jeans rather than the fit of a cultural identity within a larger population, and devote hours to the clarity of their skin instead of the clarity of their thinking. They are digging into a plate of pettiness because that is precisely what we've served them. They deserve—and are ready for—so much more.

So, do we give them a traditional high school experience—or unusual opportunities to learn more about the world? Good news: we can offer *both!* Let them cheer at games and get caught up in the social dramas of high school for a couple of years, and then take *one major step* to assure that they will accelerate their brain development. It helps to do some math: add up the number of games, dances, parties and other events a student is likely to experience during a year of high school. Now multiply that by *four*. Missing just *one* year's worth of these activities isn't likely to stunt their growth. In fact, replacing one year of traditional high school with something completely different is a very smart move, indeed.

Don't believe me? Let's ask a science guy.

Dr. Jay Giedd is a neuroscientist who specializes in the adolescent brain, which will come in handy when his own four kids reach that stage. He explains that the brain during the second decade of life is going

through a rip roarin' period of both growth and pruning. "It's a critical time for brain sculpting to take place," says Dr. Giedd. He describes the brain as being something like a block of granite at the peak of the puberty years. As he puts it, "The art—or in this case, the individual—is created by what remains after the chiseling is finished."

This chiseling is going on right now: the activities our adolescents choose to engage in (or the ones we offer them) will significantly affect their brain development. According to Dr. Giedd, what occurs during this period of life can profoundly influence a young person's perspective and develop a bigger tool chest for later problem solving. "If a teen is given the chance to spend time adapting to new ways of living, communicating with others in another language, and seeing himself and his culture from a completely different point of view, that behavior is likely to become hardwired in the brain."

Consider how your student's brain is being hardwired *today*. Perhaps she is memorizing facts for a test, practicing her sport, or working at a part-time job. Or, maybe she is sitting on the sofa, texting her friends, and complaining about her homework. Most likely, she is doing a combination of the above. It's all perfectly normal high school stuff.

We would never expect our five-year-old child to learn all she needs to know about herself and the world in a setting that emphasizes

standardized academic courses, structured competitive activities, and limited opportunities for exploration, and yet that's exactly what we expect our fifteen-year-old student to do. What would it look like if we treated our fifteen-year-old with that same concern for her brain development we had when she was *five*?

Well, we'd go deeper, broader, faster. We'd make sure she had the chance to meet a diverse range of individuals—mentors, teachers and friends of all ages and backgrounds—and expose her to as many learning experiences as possible. There would be much greater emphasis on gaining independence and developing an understanding of the world around her, and exposing her to other cultures—through music, food, dance, art and literature as well as travel—would become far more important than surrounding her with that which is familiar. Most of all, we would recognize that beneficial brain-sculpting life experiences aren't likely to happen while she's sitting in study hall or scooping ice cream at the mall.

Smart Move: Wise parents understand the importance of doing everything possible to maximize their student's prime adolescent years and recognize that staying put and keeping things the same is severely limiting them at a time when exposure to new environments is precisely what will help them most.

Preparing your kid for college? Snooze. The real challenge is helping your student hardwire his brain for young adulthood. And

though I'm not one to get overly urgent or dramatic about such things, the fact is that time is a-wastin'—*and so is your student's brain.*

Going on a year-long exchange during or right after high school is the optimum way to set that adolescent brain on fire and launch a life-changing period of reflection and connection. Sure, your son or daughter could wait until college, and I highly recommend going abroad while earning credits toward that university degree. (Chapter Seven will show you how to avoid the pitfalls and help your student get the most out of that experience.) But there is a *dramatic* difference between spending a year in another country at 20 or 21 and doing it at 16. It's never too late to experience life in another culture, but there's definitely a sweet spot at which learning and maturation are amplified.

This is the time to go global.

Compared to a typical junior in college, a typical junior in high school is:

- less attached to a particular view about how things are supposed to be
- less fearful of making mistakes and more willing to try new things
- less locked into a set of identity markers such as graduation class, college, teams, clubs, dorms, roommates, and achievements
- less committed to a particular field of study and therefore open to discovering new talents and interests

■ less likely to have psychological barriers to learning and speaking a new language

But here's the most important thing: The younger student who spends a year abroad is more likely to be *transformed* by the experience, leading to even greater adaptability and an enthusiasm for taking on new challenges.

Bold parents recognize that the advantages of sending kids abroad during college pale in comparison to the advantages of sending kids abroad at a younger and more malleable age.

If you want to give your high school student the very best chance to metamorphose into a mature, confident, flexible and outrageously global young adult in a short period of time, get ready to wave goodbye.

In the next section, you'll learn all about the surprisingly predictable cycle of highs and lows your exchange student is likely to experience—and why you should be celebrating every struggle.

Old School: going abroad for a semester during the junior year of college in order to experience life in another culture.

Bold School: spending a year abroad during high school in order to hardwire a student's brain for flexibility and language learning.

Boo Hoos and Woo Hoos: What To Expect

When you have completed 95% of your journey, you are only halfway there.

Japanese proverb

Dr. Joe Dispenza has studied the human mind for decades and is the author of *Evolve the Brain: The Science of Changing Your Mind*.¹⁸ If you've seen the movie, "What the Bleep Do We Know?" you might remember him as the guy who talked about waking up in the morning and spending a few moments creating his day by intentionally visualizing the way he wanted it to go. As both an expert on the ways we change our brains through new experiences and as a father, Dr. Dispenza has been fascinated to observe some adolescent brain hardwiring in his own daughter who studied abroad in Switzerland during high school. He told me:

Insider Insight:

Studying in Switzerland was a remarkably enriching and life-changing experience for my daughter.

As a scientist, I know that the brain is organized to reflect everything we know in our environment. All of the people we've met, every thing we've

owned, all the places we've visited, and all the experiences we've embraced throughout the different times in our lives are patterned as diverse but orderly neural networks in our brain. To be placed in a new environment requires an inward dance of the mind with the new stimuli of the external world.

Our greatest learning occurs through transformation and change. As a result of being outside our comfort zone, we must think and act in new ways that totally disrupt everything we have known and continue to adapt and respond until the external world becomes familiar to us. This new information becomes integrated into our nervous system and we are no longer the same.

As a father, I was a little concerned initially when I saw my daughter struggle to adapt to the cultural differences. Then, over time, I was very pleased to see her grow in so many ways. She truly flourished and became more confident, mature, broad-minded and worldly. She was different.

Spending time abroad during adolescence literally transforms the developing mind and brain. We know that novel experiences grow brain circuitry by making more enriched synaptic connections. If a student breaks away from a routine and predictable environment in order to embrace new social, cultural and political conditions, his or her mind—and brain—will be profoundly shaped by those opportunities for growth.

The biggest challenge for parents is letting go and trusting the process. Parents must look beyond their own limitations and the prejudices that they might project onto their sons and daughters. Seeing great potential in our children is exactly what we always wanted someone to see in us! Our brain is plastic enough to adapt to new and unique circumstances, and when it does, it always flourishes. This is our greatest gift as humans.

Most parents of exchange students are stunned and thrilled to see their kids become far more independent and responsible than they'd ever imagined possible. The kids have no choice—and ultimately, that's really the point at which *all* of us step up and become young adults. And, as in most worthy adventures, there are likely to be a few storms and setbacks.

Culture shock.

Homesickness.

Saying goodbye.

Reverse culture shock.

These are difficult but *absolutely essential* elements of the year-long exchange.

FACT: Only about **4%** of Rotary Youth Exchange students on the year-long program **come home earlier than their scheduled return date**—and this includes those who come back early in order to graduate with their classmates, attend a family event, or start summer school as well as those who are dealing with homesickness or culture shock.

Dennis White knows a lot about culture shock and its evil twin, reverse culture shock. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran between 1968 and 1970, he experienced firsthand the challenges of cultural immersion and re-integration. Now, he is a psychologist who specializes in reverse culture shock.¹⁹ He works with Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, and exchange program coordinators across North America in an effort to teach others about the profound emotional and mental changes that are experienced by those who spend time living abroad. Although Dr. White has trained members of numerous organizations over the years, he is especially proud to serve as the current chair of the Rotary International Youth Exchange Committee, an international panel that advises the RI Board of Directors on all aspects of the Youth Exchange program.

During his years of working with thousands of students, parents and exchange organizers, Dr. White discovered that, though each individual's experience is unique in many ways, there are a few very predictable stages that students go through while living abroad. In addition, he has seen that those who experience reverse culture shock

when they come home are the ones who were most fully immersed during their exchange and are most likely to reap the benefits of their time abroad in profound and lifelong ways.

In other words, tussling with the culture shock twins is a *good* thing.

Dr. White has some advice for those who think sending students to live abroad for a year sounds like a super fun vacation:

Insider Insight:

I tell parents that if they want to send their kid on a trip that will have them coming home the same but happier, they should buy a ticket to Disney World. A year-long exchange is a life-altering experience, and parents need to be aware of the extraordinary maturation process that their kids will undergo while they are away.

Anyone who has traveled extensively is familiar with culture shock—a temporary disorientation that comes from being exposed to a different place, different language, and different customs. *Living* in a new place for an extended period is like turbo-charging the experience. Those who go through culture shock aren't doing anything "wrong"—in fact, the opposite is true. Many would argue that the most rewarding exchanges are those that are characterized by a cage-rattling case of culture shock followed by an even more identity-melting dose of reverse culture shock upon returning home.

According to Dr. White, there are four main stages of culture shock, and—here’s the kicker—they might repeat themselves in cycles depending on the student and the host culture. Here’s the way he breaks it down:

1) Excitement and Enthusiasm

The honeymoon period. Everyone’s great, the place is amazing, and everything is fantastic! This initial stage may be repeated in shorter cycles as students learn new skills, develop more proficiency with the language, or become more independent as travelers.

2) Irritability

The honeymoon’s over. Things are starting to get annoying. The student begins to notice real differences (beyond the food and language) and though they may try to accept the way things are, they can’t shake the irritability. They might not understand why they feel the way they do, and may attribute their annoyance to particular incidences or people (host families are often caught in the crosshairs) rather than their own experience of culture shock.

3) Adaptation

Reality check. This is the longest, most difficult and most rewarding stage when students accept that they will have to adapt if they are going to be successful in their host culture. They start

dedicating themselves to learning the language and making friends. Things start to come more naturally, and they become more comfortable with the elements that were difficult to accept in the beginning.

4) Biculturalism

High five! This stage may come very near the end of the stay or even emerge once the student returns home. They realize that they have become competent in another culture and can function from a very different perspective.

Dr. White explains that those who spend time abroad are moving from *ethnocentrism* to *ethnorelativism*. All cultures are ethnocentric and teach their members that their ways of doing things are the preferred and appropriate way. So naturally, our first response when faced with different values and behaviors is to feel defensive and view our practices as right and the other culture's as wrong, strange, or just plain ridiculous. Over time, we begin to open up to new ideas.

"Ethnorelativism is the awareness that develops as one realizes there are other valid ways of dealing with the world, whether we agree with them or not," says Dr. White.

He offers this helpful condensed version of the process:

- ▶ I don't like the way they do this—it's stupid!
- ▶ But they seem to be doing okay doing it this way.
- ▶ If I want to survive here, I'd better learn to do it this way.
- ▶ Now that I can do it this way, it doesn't seem so bad, even though I may still prefer to do it my way.

The best exchange programs require students to live with at least two families during the course of the year (though it may not be possible in remote areas). This allows students to develop greater flexibility, adjust to the rules and routines of each household while getting to know more people in a very intimate way, and not assume that one family defines the culture. And though changing host families is, by design, a very difficult part of the exchange experience, it's an extremely important learning process and in many cases, the most rewarding opportunity for personal growth.

I hope you can see the value of sending your son or daughter on a high school exchange, but if it's just not going to work for you or your student (or it's already too late), going abroad before, during or after *college* can provide some outstanding benefits as well.

In the next chapter, we'll take a look at how college students can study in other countries cheaply, safely, and in a manner that is most likely to lead to cultural immersion, a deeper appreciation of the

world and its diversity, and terrific opportunities to live and work abroad.

Old School: thinking that those who experience culture shock or reverse culture shock are weak, inflexible or overly dramatic.

Bold School: recognizing that those who experience culture shock and reverse culture shock are deeply immersed in their experience and fully processing their brain-boosting learning opportunity.

Thanks so much for reading this chapter on Rotary!

I hope you agree that it includes valuable information for students and parents considering an exchange as well as those who are already involved in the Rotary program.

The rest of the book offers great tips for students who return from their exchange and want to make the best choices about continuing their education in affordable and advantageous ways. In addition, there's a whole chapter on creating a low-cost study abroad program in college—and getting full credit for it! It's a very helpful resource for rebounders and their families.

For more information about *The New Global Student*, please visit <http://www.NewGlobalStudent.com>

