

EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

By: Elena Macedo Mascarenhas

Each year, the Rotary Club organizes high school student exchanges with over 20 foreign countries. Elena Mascarenhas has been an exchange student at Flagler/Palm Coast High School for the past 11 months, and will soon return home to Brazil.

“Are you leaving? For a whole entire year? Are you serious...Why?” I don’t even remember how many times I heard that before I came to America. Lots of questions were around, not only in my friends’ and family’s heads but also in my own... How, when, where, why? And for a long time the only answer I had was “I’m going to live my dream”.

Some people said they couldn’t imagine themselves doing something like this and it was hard to understand how I could leave everyone and everything to spend 365 days in a foreign country among strangers... But for me I wasn’t just going to a foreign country with different people and language, I was about to start the greatest adventure of my life! An experience I had dreamed about since I was 8 years old, when my sister Carla came to the USA as an exchange student. So, by the time I left Brazil, I had spent half of my life dealing with this idea, that became my goal, and I was ready to go for it!

I’m not saying it was easy! It was a big deal to realize that I wouldn’t be present in important moments like my mother’s National Award of Medicine ceremony, my cousins Sweet Sixteen or Graduation, my Junior Prom, Carnival, my grandma’s 80th birthday and the very first one of my little nephew. The dilemma about school credits, test make-ups and university exams was scary... but I always knew I would be back, stronger, to face all that.

The last days in my home country were crazy! I was overwhelmed with documents, applications, visa interviews, payments, doctors’ appointments, overseas contacts, school reports update and translation, counselor’s advice, family meetings, goodbye parties, packing...Oh my gosh! How is a teenage girl supposed to pack for a full year long trip? I



didn’t have the answer - and I am still without it- but I had no choice... So, after thousands of Brazilian hugs, kisses, tears, waving hands (almost all my friends and family took me to the airport!) and 13 hours of flying, “the skinny smiling girl” (as Edna, my first host mom says) arrived in America!

The Rotary and my 3 host families - the Bevels, Lea Stokes, and Tofals - were there to welcome me in my new life, to help with all the papers and... to tease me about the luggage! My “luggages”, I mean. There were 4 suitcases, easily weighing about 170 lb! This was my first “embarrassing situation factor” and also led me to my first lesson. At the airport a worker refused to help me put them on the cart (can you believe it?) and I realized that sometimes I would be by myself and I would have to be able to solve my problems by myself as well. Since that moment I’ve been learning a lot and continuously.

Fantastic and unforgettable is what these 9 months have been for me! The experiences in an American high school (FPCHS), in the families, with the Rotary, with my exchange student friends and all around the country (so far I’ve been in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, North Carolina, the Florida Keys, Disney and Sea World, Massachusetts and I’m about to go Washington DC, the Grand Canyon, Idaho, Oregon, Los Angeles, Las Vegas...!) are making me grow so much. Now I appreciate each person, thing and moment even more

than before, because I know how fast they can be gone, or better, how fast I’ll be gone!

Accepting this year is supposed to have a beginning and an end is the hardest thing about the exchange student program. When we first arrive in the host county, a year seems to be eternal... but that is so wrong! This year goes by so fast that I can’t even believe it’s almost gone. We, the exchange students, have so much fun, getting to know a lot of people and places that were so far away from our reality, learning about each others culture (no one but Srushti, my Indian friend, could convince me that they can still ride elephants to go to school nowadays!) and about the host country’s culture - that becomes our country and our culture. The pain of saying goodbye turns into a feeling of happiness, accomplishment, and gratitude, for all we got to live during our adventure! It is awesome to look behind and see how much we have been doing and enjoying. It is good to look at our photos that have been saving each detail of this magic time, and I’m telling you, no one can beat the amount of pictures taken by an exchange student... some people even say that we are kind of crazy about that “Are you taking picture of the floor, why?” But we want to be able to show everyone all the cool things we saw and people we met. We want to show that despite our differences we are all so alike and that it is easy to understand and respect each other if we only try.

“If all teenagers could be an exchange student,

there would be no war” said a former President of Rotary International. I believe in this saying. How could someone desire to attack a place after having such great time living there? Or after understanding that people can have different habits and beliefs and that it is okay?

Before coming here, I had an image of Americans in my head, an image that wasn't bad, but it was the one that people show on TV...it was a stereotype. We have to break all of them and make our concepts by our own, and get to live in a people's culture as one of them is the best way to do it.

My willingness to open my world motivated me to leave Brazil last summer and start my life all over. A new country, new school, new language, new friends, new family - a new Elena. I was scared how many changes I would have to pass through, but getting to do my exchange student program with the Rotary International organization was very important to my family - they know I'm safe even miles away from home - and to me. Our hosts provide a whole bunch of remarkable experiences, such as orientations, club meetings, cool trips and events with the other exchange students or with Rotarians, that become part of our family.

This year has been one of the best in my life and it definitely is the most intense, the most constructive and unforgettable that I'll ever have!

I'll leave America soon, but I'll take with me my friends, my adopted family, my memories, (my luggage, now even heavier! lol) and the love I have for this country, because this will be with me wherever I go, safe and sound in my heart.

Elena also talked to a few of her friends about their own experiences. Kira Chichersky from Flagler Beach went to Brazil in 2004/2005, Nathalia Cunha, also from Brazil, is presently an inbound student in Jacksonville, and Bristol Marotta from Palm Coast represents the new generation of outbound students and leaves for France in August.

How was the experience that you had in Brazil?

KIRA- It was an amazing experience! It felt like a new home filled with friends and family I have never met before... but they all became my new friends, my new family and my new home. I learned to learn anything anyone is willing to teach you, and that you got to leave your mark on the world but making sure they leave their



marks on you too

What's your strongest memory?

KIRA- Waiting for my host mommy to come home and then sitting on her bed watching CSI, eating chocolate and her rubbing my back until I fell asleep. Then I used to feel that she really was my mother

What changed after your exchange student program?

KIRA- I became more open to other cultures, religions and way of life. To come back is really hard. Your parents and everyone are so happy to see you but you don't really know if you want to be back. You don't really know where you belong anymore... But after a while you realize that it is okay to "belong" in both places, your heart can be at two places at once and it's alright.

Nathalia, how did your family and friends react when you decided to get in the program?

NATHALIA- My family, even knowing that they would miss me, always supported it because they knew that its profits will last for my whole life. My friends supported as well, but at the beginning it was hard to accept that I wouldn't graduate with them.

How has this experience been for you?

NATHALIA- Precious. I live with other families in a different culture, being friends with kids from all over the world (the exchange students) and

all the experiences at the high school, such as joining the tennis team, make of this time a marvelous one!

Bristol, how did you decided to become an exchange student?

BRISTOL- I heard about the exchange student program through a good friend of mine. She made it sound like such fun! I know it's an amazing opportunity to be selected and I know it will be the adventure of a lifetime

How do you feel knowing that within 5 months you'll be living in another country, with another people and culture?

BRISTOL- It is amazing to think that soon I'll be an exchange student in France! I'm so excited! I haven't learned much about the place where I'll be staying, but I see that as a good thing because it means that I'll have a lot to share with people when I come back from my experience!

Rotary Youth Exchange is operated completely by volunteers, as part of Rotary's commitment to international and community service. Any high school student interested in spending a year in another country is welcome to apply in the fall, for the following academic year. In Flagler, Rotary offers exchanges with more than 20 different countries. For more information about becoming an exchange student, or for families interested in hosting a Rotary student, visit www.ryeflorida.org or contact Lea Stokes, Flagler Beach Rotary Club, at 386-439-0134. ■