

The Post-Standard

Culture class

Rotary's Youth Exchange students prepare to head abroad

Tuesday, December 07, 2004

By Fred A. Mohr

Staff writer

More than 40 Central New York high school students will spend a year attending school, meeting new people and experiencing cultures in other countries, thanks to a 35-year-old local Rotary International program.

Sponsored by District 7150's 48 Rotary clubs, the Youth Exchange Program annually chooses local high school students to study and live abroad for a year with host families in 25 countries, from Australia to Venezuela. The program also accepts a like number of students from abroad to live and study in Central New York.

Don Lough, vice chairman of the district's outbound program, for those headed overseas, said the program promotes international relations through one-to-one contact, while offering students an opportunity to learn and grow. He's a graduate of the program himself, having spent his junior year in Japan. Now a funeral home director in N. Syracuse, he said the program helped him mature.

"I grew up a lot that year and learned how to take care of myself," he said. "I think it helped me handle the pressures of being away from home when I went to college. I didn't get homesick like a lot of kids."

Students chosen for the program next year had a variety of reasons for going through the intensive application and interview process.

Benjamin Weisenthal, 17, a senior at Jamesville-DeWitt High School, will spend a year in Chile. He said his father and his other travels inspired him to apply for the program.

Earlier this year, he spent 10 days in Honduras working with his father, Dr. Robert Weisenthal, an ophthalmologist, at an eye clinic. He also spent a month last summer working with a Quaker community service group in rural southeast Mexico.

"I want to be a doctor, and seeing my dad in Honduras made me realize how many people there are around the world that you can help," Weisenthal said. "In Mexico, I saw a completely different culture that I wanted to learn more about."

Kimberly Owens, a senior at Chittenango High School, said she's always been interested in studying abroad but didn't expect to do it until college.

She'll be the second member of her family to participate in the program. Her sister, Jackie, spent a year in Poland.

"I want to learn to be more independent, and become a stronger individual," said Owens, who will spend the 2005-06 school year in France. "My sister told me to be confident in myself, and don't worry if you can't speak (the language) perfectly."

Her mother, Rena Owens, praised the Rotary program. "Her sister learned so much, seeing another country," she said. "They gain an appreciation for other people and cultures, the architecture. . . . It opens their eyes to the bigger world."

District 7150's exchange program has sent more than 2,000 U.S. students abroad since it began in 1969, said Lough. Costs can range from \$2,000 to \$4,000 per student for travel and living expenses, although scholarships are available.

Rotary clubs worldwide send about 8,000 students to 82 countries each year, he said.

Students are expected to be ambassadors for the United States. They receive instruction in public speaking to prepare them to address Rotary clubs and other organizations about their experiences, both in their host country and at home, Lough said. "I look for outgoing students, someone who will be a good fit and represent our country and Rotary," he said.