

MID-YORK WEEKLY & PENNYSAVER

Central New York Rotary exchange students reflect on foreign experiences

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Bryon Ackerman

On Wednesday, Aug. 3, the Rotary District 7150 Youth Exchange Program, of Central New York, held its 2005 Welcome Home Dinner at the Rusty Rail in Canastota. After some social time and some introductory speeches, 37 "rebounds," high school students who recently returned home from spending the past school year in a foreign country, were asked to give three to four minute speeches summing up their experiences.

The event served as a culmination for the returning students, while also giving the "outbound" students, those who will be going away next school year, a chance to hear more about what their experiences may be like.

The students are high school juniors or seniors, or are recent high school graduates who have delayed their first year of college to go abroad.

While in their countries, the students go to school, learn a new language, live with host families, meet new friends and often have some of the best experiences of their lives.

To be selected, the candidates had to go through applications and a two-step interview process. The first interviews were with their local Rotary clubs - this year's students who spoke came from the Rotary clubs of Skaneateles, Fayetteville-Manlius, Utica, Oneida, Baldwinsville, Oriskany-Whitestown, Camden, Moravia, Aurora, Greater Utica Sunrise, Sauquoit, New Hartford, Dewitt, Herkimer, Syracuse Inner-City, West Winfield and Cato - and the second interviews were with the Central New York district.

Students don't choose which countries they go to but are instead placed in countries that are determined to be most fitting for them, based on a variety of factors. All of the student-speakers seemed to be happy with the choices that were made for them.

One such student was Laura Bramley, from the Utica Rotary. She went to Clinton Senior High School but spent the last year in West Germany, in the city of Bonn.

She initially thought that she could handle going abroad with no problems at all. That was until she got to the airport. She began crying as she said goodbye to her family, and as she was getting on the plane to leave, she thought, "This is the biggest mistake I've ever made."



Anne Marie Wells, of the Sauquoit Rotary, traveled to France this past school year as part of the exchange student program. Her speech at the 2005 Welcome Home Dinner about her influence on a stubborn French chef was among the most emotional of the night. (photo by Bryon Ackerman)

Wondering what she had gotten herself into, she made a promise to herself not to cry again until her parents came to visit her in West Germany. Along the way, as she met and had to say goodbye to new acquaintances, she was forced to break that promise. She had become close with the people she had met and had a wonderful experience.

She said that a lot of people think of being a foreign exchange student as having a huge adventure, but she described it more as a completely separate life. She enjoyed time she spent with her host family, doing things a regular family would do.

"The best moments were the simple ones," Bramley said.

One aspect she really enjoyed was that Bonn is a very international city, so she got to meet people not only from Germany but also from such places as China, Chili and the Ukraine.

A moment in her history class showed how truly an international experience she was having. Snow is rare in West Germany, but on that day she could see snow coming down outside of the classroom window. She turned to her classmate and said, "The snow reminds me of my home in New York."

Her classmate responded, "The snow reminds me of my home in Kazakhstan too."

A major goal of the Rotary program is to have the students act as American ambassadors during their experiences. During a time when the American image in the world is shaky, at best, this is especially important.

Anne Marie Wells, of the Sauquoit Rotary, traveled to France for the past year. She previously attended Sauquoit Valley High School and will attend SUNY Binghamton in the fall.

Going to France has given her a new bond with her sister, Mary Paul, who also went to France. They now have the experience and the language in common.

While in France, she also made many new friends. During her last week of school, she went to go horseback riding, so she just wore jeans, a t-shirt and flip-flops. When she arrived, it turned out to be a surprise going away party, thrown for her by her new friends.

Everyone else was dressed up for the event, and she felt embarrassed in her horseback-riding outfit. She quickly forgot, however, as her friends gave her a large French flag with messages from all of them. They stayed up until the middle of the night, dancing and having a good time.

Another positive aspect of her journey was her last host parents: Felipe and Micheline Gouyon.

Felipe Gouyon is a gourmet chef. Wells got to have daily gourmet meals for lunch and dinner because Gouyon always prepared her the special of the day.

Gouyon was always nice and made Wells feel comfortable in his home, but he also told her that he was doing her a

favor letting her stay in his home.

When Gouyon was a little boy, an American soldier was rude to him, and his hatred for Americans had been increasing ever since. Wells said that the current political situation hasn't helped his opinion either.

The Gouyons like to travel often and have been to Mexico, Canada and all over Europe but never to the United States. Gouyon told Wells that nothing could ever make him set foot in America.

It's kind of hard for a teenager to act as an American ambassador when someone is so stubbornly against Americans, but Wells personally continued to have a good relationship with him, nonetheless.

During her last dinner with the Gouyons, Wells discussed how she was feeling very nervous about flying overseas for her plane ride home.

"We haven't been on a plane in a long time," Gouyon said, turning to speak directly to his wife. "It looks like the next time we'll have to visit Anne Marie in New York."

Contact us: Email: mail2@psaver.com * Phone: 315.792.4990 800.765.2112 Fax: 315.792.4904 *

By U.S. Mail:

The Observer-Dispatch
221 Oriskany Plaza
Utica, NY 13501

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