

From India to Airdrie

Student takes part in exchange program from Mumbai, India

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For Tahseen Jamnagarwala, living in Airdrie has meant she has had to get used to cold weather, living with a new family, and eating food without spices.

Jamnagarwala, 16, has come to Airdrie from Mumbai, India for one year as part of the Rotary Youth Exchange Program. She has been living with the family of Michelle Wing, 15, and attending George McDougall High School.

She said back home, all of her cousins have been on exchanges.

"Hearing stories from them, it just sounded so fun," she said.

Jamnagarwala arrived in Airdrie about four months ago, and said she has noticed a lot of "little things" about the Canadian culture.

"There's so much in terms of religion and language," she said.

She has also noticed differences in the way school is run in Canada. She said she finds schooling easier here than back home.

"I find it's more strict (in India)," she said. "We have uniforms. And I have never been to a school with, from grades 9 to 12, with so many kids.

"There's a lot of people, and it's just different."

Jamnagarwala also doesn't typically celebrate Christmas with her own family and will have the experience for the first time this year.

"This will be the first traditional Christmas for me," she said. "We've always learned about it in school, and there's parties and things related to Christmas, but probably not as much as here."

She said there were a number of little things she had to get used to, but the cold weather and living with a different family were the biggest adjustments she has had to make.

"You have to be prepared that you're not going to be living with your family," she said. "You're on your own. You will have the family that you're with and they'll be nice, but a lot of the things that you'll be expected to do, you'll do by yourself."

And she said that although she attended boarding school and is used to being away from home, the situation is different.

"There, it was a protected environment and I had all my friends," she said. "But I like it. The family is nice and I'll miss them when I go back."

By the time Jamnagarwala is heading back to India, Wing will be on an exchange of her own. She is the next outbound student for Airdrie Rotary, and will also be going on a year-long exchange starting in July. She won't know what country she's going to until March, but said her first choice is Brazil.

"I'm nervous; I have to learn the language," Wing said.

However, she added that she is also excited about living with a new family and studying in a different country for a year.

"I warm up to people really easily so I'm hoping that I'll like it a lot, because if I don't like it, I'm not going to have fun," she said. "But I think I'll be OK."

Although she will be attending school in another country, Wing won't receive credit for her studies. However, she said she still thinks the program is worthwhile.

"It's like a free year to study and do something totally different," she said.

The Rotary Club offers both short-term and long-term exchanges for high school students around the world. Those interested in participating in the program as an exchange student or as a host family can email Greg Wing at gregwing@shaw.ca or visit www.airdrierotary.ca.

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