



This year's Rotary Exchange student hails from rural area in southern France

# Small-town charm nothing new

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Attending school in a small high school for the autumn term, and then spending Christmas in a small town, are nothing new for Laura Portanier. This year's sole guest of the St. Marys Rotary Club in the Rotary Exchange program, the Grade 10 student hails from the south of France, in what she describes as "a rural area" that's 45 minutes from the nearest large town and two hours from the region's largest city of Montpellier.

Portanier just recently wrapped up her stay

with the family of Jill and Scott Taylor, with whom she had been living since she arrived in Canada at the end of August. She is now living with Chris and Mary Woolf.

"This has been a wonderful experience for our family," Scott Taylor explained during a recent visit by the Journal Argus to the Taylor home. He encouraged other families to consider hosting a Rotary Exchange student in the future.

The most life-changing experiences, of course, are those that are happening to Portanier, who had not travelled to North America — or anywhere outside of some of the neighbouring European countries to France — prior to boarding the Toronto-bound airplane in August.

St. Marys DCVI has fewer students than the school she attends at home — but only just. Her school in France, which houses students from Grade 6-9, has about 800 students.

When she returns after her year in Canada, she'll move into another school housing Grades 10-12.

Language hasn't been too much of a barrier, with Portanier's English now being strong enough that she can understand almost everything, and express herself with fluency.

"The only subject that's still hard is Math," she admits. "With Math, when you don't understand what the teacher is saying right away, it can be difficult."

So far this year, the weather in southwestern Ontario — with our lack of appreciable snow and only sporadic sub-zero temperatures — has also been something to which Portanier is accustomed. Her home is located at almost exactly the same latitude as we are here, but with the Mediterranean Sea situated so close by, the climate is typically more moderate.

"A week ago, we had some snow, but that's not normal for right now," she explained. "We don't usually have snow in December. We usually only have it in January and February."

But the residents of her home region are certainly familiar with year-round snow. That's because, typically, the

towns and villages are in the valleys of this mountainous region, while towering above are the high, snow-capped peaks of the Alps.

And this is one of the things Portanier has been missing as she prepares to spend Christmas in southwestern Ontario.

"I think it's pretty similar here as where I live," she commented about her home for the year. "But here, it is pretty flat."

In February, a group of Rotary Exchange students will enjoy a week of downhill skiing, so she'll have an opportunity to feel more at home at that time. Then next summer, there's a planned excursion to the Grand Canyon in the southern US.

In the meantime, she's grateful to the Taylors for taking her along on visits to Niagara Falls, to Toronto for a Blue Jays baseball game and the Ripley's Aquarium, and to see Man of La Mancha at the Stratford Festival.

She says she's not athletically inclined, so it has been an adjustment fitting into a sports-minded lifestyle in St. Marys. At home, her favourite activity is dance; since she was age five, she has learned a range of disciplines, from jazz to hip hop and now classical dance.

Still, she says taking part in Rotary Exchange "has been a good experience."

At the Taylor home, one of her final activities was building a gingerbread house, attaching colourful, edible decorations to her cottage made of gingerbread that a friend of the family's had made from scratch. It was something entirely new for her.

She laughs that there's one other tradition that she'd like to take home to France — the tradition of shaking hands and saying 'Merry Christmas' at big social gatherings. At home, she relates, it's always a kiss on either cheek for everyone at the party — a tradition she says seems to take forever when guests arrive, and which she admits she's not fond of.

For New Year's Eve, meanwhile, she's hoping to have a party with at least one thing that she enjoys from the get-togethers back home in the south of France: some dancing, of course.



SLATER PHOTOS

The Taylor family, just days before the conclusion of their stint as Rotary Exchange host family for Laura Portanier of France. From left: Lake, Jill, Lydia, Portanier, Scott, and Eric. Top photo: Portanier, who is now staying with Chris and Mary Woolf, holds the gingerbread house she built — a new Christmastime experience for her — in the Taylor kitchen.

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