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It feels like just yesterday, I received the fax that I had won a GRSP scholarship and I was running all over Belfast telling the entire city about the exciting news! There wasn't a doubt in my mind that I was going to accept and fly over to Georgia as soon as possible.

After numerous emails from other students, my roommate and my wonderful host family, I was ecstatic and when August came around I said goodbye to a teary mum and hopped on the plane. When I landed in Atlanta I was greeted with open arms and friendly smiles by my trustee, Allan and Sheryl, a spectacular lady from the Loganville club.

The time between arriving and school starting was crazy. I met loads of amazing people from different clubs including my host family, who are just incredible! Trish, her mum being from Belfast, was as excited as I was and showed me all her wee Irish bits and pieces and made me feel right at home. She has been wonderful! Even when I got homesick she was great and signed her emails "your American mom" which was so sweet! Her daughter Mysi treats me like a sister and her twin grandsons are so cute... it will break my heart to leave them.

Meeting all the other students at conclaves was great and everyone is so nice and it's always been comforting to see a friendly face, Paula, from my high school back home. I have never met so many people from so many different cultures and it is so cool to hear everyone's stories. I have definitely made some true friends here, especially in my rotary girlies at UGA... Emelie, Maria and Helen (my Swedish Queens), Maripa (my wee Colombian chica), Katie (my Australian Kitty) and Marie (my little Danish gal). I don't think I have ever laughed and cried so much with anyone and I will never, ever forget these girls (even though seven months on you're still making fun of my accent... "How Now Brown Cow"... remember that!)

The GRSP program is definitely a unique and wonderful one and long may it continue to bring young people together from all over the world.

To everyone who made this possible, a million thank-yous! The whole experience has been absolutely mind blowing and I would do it all over again in a heartbeat. I can honestly say that I have found a home away from home in Georgia.

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One page is not enough to tell what these months in Georgia as part of GRSP have meant to me... there are too many memories, too many friends, too many new experiences... I will do my best to summarize it!!

Leaving home was not easy... but that sad feeling of the goodbye did not last more than 10 hours, when my wonderful host families picked me up at the airport and made me feel home from that moment on! I cannot thank my host families enough for how great they have been; they have opened the doors of their homes to me and have always supported me!! Dale, Katrina, Adam, Trevor, Jourdan, Victoria, Tobey, Steve, Patti and Dennis: THANK YOU so much for everything, for making me feel part of your families! This time in Georgia would not have been so great without you... I really hope you come to Colombia sometime! You know you have a house in Medellín! I would love to have you there!

Well, a week after arriving in Georgia, and of course with the help of my host families, I moved into my dorm at the GSU Village! A totally new experience! And university started... I did not know anyone, but not much time went by until I met Roger, Lucy, Mary Jo, Ulla and Aleja! (All of them are GRSP, except for Aleja) You guys have been like a family to me... you don't know how much I have learned from each of you and how much I will miss you after this year... I will never forget all the things we have done together: our late talks, our parties, studying (or, at least, trying to!), cooking, eating at Quizno's and Wingnuts (which, by the way, are responsible for our extra pounds!!), my honey buns, Mister Clean, diet Cokes, etc. I feel as if I had known you for a long long time... each of you will always be in my heart! I hope we can meet again soon! (Lucy, I am sending you my kids! Mary Jo, call me any time you want, I promise I will cheer you up!! Roger... no more early parties... Aleja, no more scrambled eggs after partying...).

A week after school started we had the conclave in LaGrange! About 75 people from all over the world, who looked like strangers at the beginning... but, again, it did not last too long either! After that weekend and the other student weekends I have had the opportunity of getting to know you better and now we are like a big family! Thank you so much to each of you, GRSP fellows, for all what you have shared with me! Being part of GRSP with you has been the best experience! I have got to know a lot about each of your countries from you and you can be sure, it has changed my way of seeing life, it has opened my mind!! I have had a great time with you! I will miss having you over in my dorm in the weekends!

And time has gone by so fast... We finally found our way in downtown Atlanta and enjoyed its diversity! Learned about American sports (football, baseball, ice hockey!) and southern food (fried chicken, ice tea, grits). Studied, traveled, partied, etc. It has been a wonderful experience... I am sure it is once in a life time! It has been one of the best years of my life. I've had the chance of proving myself in a different country, in a different culture and I have grown so much during these months; I have learned so many things about the world, about life...

My sponsoring rotary clubs: Snellville, South Gwinnett and Braselton: thanks a lot for this great opportunity. You can be sure I have made the best out of it! I have only met beautiful people in each of these clubs, it is unbelievable! You do not know how much this experience has meant to me and how much it has changed me!

Janis Comer and Al Hombroek: without your support and organization this would have not be possible. Thank you so much!!

My host families for the student weekends: I was lucky to have the nicest host families for the student weekends! Thank you so much for your hospitality!! I really enjoyed staying with you!

Mom, Dad and Monik: I know you are always with me, thanks for your support!

As I said at the beginning, one page is not enough to share all that I have experienced this year. The only thing I can say is that it has been the BEST...

Thanks "y'all" for this wonderful experience!!

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Georgia on my mind...

I love traveling and I have always grabbed every opportunity to see the world. Getting close to graduation at my home university made me realize that things were about to change and nothing was going to be the same.

So I applied for several scholarship abroad...

When I learnt that I had got the GRSP scholarship last January I had no idea what I was getting myself into. To be more precise, I had some ideas, and honestly I was a bit afraid of going to "The South" of what I had only known that the people spoke differently and that they were "rednecks". BUT I was up to the adventure, and deep down I knew it must turn out to be at least "good"...

To my greatest wow, I have not just learnt how to talk in a Southern accent and use "y'all" consistently (which btw actually makes much more sense) but I have found that the Southerners are the most hospitable people I have ever met. They are proud of their wonderful heritage and want to share it with everyone, they are eager to hear about other cultures and have great food.

I could go on forever with a huge list of what I have got out of this year, but I don't think the whole GRSP yearbook would have enough space in it...and it cannot even be put in words.

First of all, I have the coolest host family (the Clarks) - no matter what anyone else says. They are great and I will always love them!

I go to the coolest Georgia university (UGA) in the coolest university town (Athens) in the US that gave innumerable opportunities to dive into many amazing programs, events, classes...and of course the big 50 yard pool that I love. I have taken dance classes (among which I took a tap course which I have always wanted to), I learnt about US foreign policy, and to satisfy my "learning-new-languages" urge I have taken up Arabic in which now I am able to tell a story in past tense with a basic vocabulary. I have gone to concerts of various genres and seen great performances. I had never lived in a dorm before, so now I can tick this off my checklist as well. The first semester demonstrated some of the negative sides, but then I moved into Charli, my GRSP friend's room and it has been the coolest thing ever!

I have made great friends who are the coolest people in Georgia and all over the world!

And the cherry on top: I have traveled to the coolest places!!

I have known the Rotary family for 7 years now, and I am convinced it is the greatest international peace building organization in the world! Before coming to Georgia I had already received much from Rotary through other programs and Rotaract. During my stay and trips around the US I always contacted local Rotarians and Rotaractors so we could meet and share ideas. This is how I attended the Chicago Rotaract club's meeting and was invited to do some community projects with them. This is how I had dinner with the New Orleans Rotary president on New Year's Eve. This is how I and my friends had the chance to go to a real rodeo in Houston with local Rotaractors in spring break thanks to the local Rotary president. This is how we were hosted in a Rotary club president's home in Austin...and this is all just what has happened outside of Georgia so far.

The love and care of the Southerners are unique and this is what I will take with me when I go home. That is the greatest and most valuable treasure I have got here and will cherish it till the end of my life.

At first this was going to be a nice sabbatical year, but it has turned out to be much more. I have become more open, more tolerant, more positive and love life even more! I have not only learnt much more of life, cultures and relationships than five years university could ever give, but I have found many new everlasting friends and family here. I will always be grateful for that and I hope that one day I'll be able to give back some of it to the world.

Thank you my friends, family and Rotary!

my photoblog is: www.flickr.com/photos/annabencze



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Incredible. Just one of the words that I can use to describe my year here in Georgia. I knew coming into this that my life would be forever changed from this experience. And there is no doubt in my mind that my life has been changed for the better. This year has been like a dream, an amazing year long dream that I will never forget for the rest of my life. The things that I have done and the people I have met while here, they will forever be etched in my mind. I have met people literally from all over the world all of whom are amazing and totally cherished.

The experience that I have had here has really opened my eyes to new cultures, not only American culture but culture from all over the world. We live in such a diverse place and it makes me want to experience everything more. Some of the things that will stick with me most after this year is over are the places that I saw, from Montgomery, Alabama ... twice, to New York city, to Florida and of course Georgia. Had I only seen Georgia I would have been grateful, this state has so much diversity, from the Pacific Ocean to the mountains in the north and everything in between. Southern hospitality is another thing that I will forever remember; people have welcomed us into their homes and families this entire year and I know it made this year a lot easier on us and our families.

Everyone has their own beliefs and these beliefs come from their life experiences. I came to the United States with one set of beliefs and I think that I am leaving with a completely re-arranged set of beliefs that have been crafted from my time here. I never knew how much my whole self would be affected by this experience. Before I came here everyone told me that I would be changed when I came home again, and honestly I was skeptical but I know in myself that I have definitely changed and changed for the better. This is one chapter in my life that will never be deleted. And as I embark on the next chapter of my life I know that I have totally rewritten it from my experience here. The whole world is now literally at my fingertips and I cannot wait to explore it.

I have loved every minute that I have spent here, this has been an amazing experience and I would not change it for anything. I am so grateful to have been given the opportunity to come here and be apart of this marvelous program. Incredible.