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Children deserve a chance to explore the world



Exchange students Leander from Germany ,from left, Ana from Brazil, Anaya from India, Zoe from Switzerland, Antek from Poland and Emi from Argentina participate in the Rotary Youth Exchange Orientation for Inbound students Sept. 8 at the College Settlement Camp in Horsham. The students spent two days with Rotarian youth counselors to get acclimated. The six will spend 10 months in the Lehigh Valley Area. Jennifer Cunningham

What kind of parents send their 17-year-old child alone to a foreign country for a year, entrusting imperfect strangers to care for them as one of their own?

Who would outsource parental duties like feeding, making sure homework gets done, doing laundry, disciplining if necessary, driving to practices and friends' houses? While I'm at it, what kind of family would host a teenager from across the world to participate in their daily lives here in America?

I know, I know! Parents who believe in the power of community and family connection to change the world, one young person at a time. Parents who have confidence in their child as an agent of this change, even as they experience homesickness and culture shock. Parents who have learned that

people are people are people, and 99.99% of us are good people, no matter where we're from, what we believe or what kind of "weird" foods we eat.

As the youth programs coordinator for the Morning Star Rotary Club in Bethlehem, I am proud to speak about the transformative power of our youth programs — especially the impact of Rotary International's Youth Exchange.

I went on exchange with Rotary myself to Puebla, Mexico, right after finishing high school in a small town near Akron, Ohio. The experiences from that year changed me from a shy and tentative nerd to an outgoing and confident nerd.

I also gained lifelong friends, fluency in Spanish, and bone-deep appreciation for the United States and my own family. Sure, everyone evolves and grows up, but the year abroad accelerated that growth and added layers of self-confidence and perspectives I know I would not have gotten otherwise. So strong was the effect that my family in Ohio hosted a few Rotary students, and my brother went to Argentina on exchange.

Now, I have assumed the awesome responsibility of offering that exchange experience to students and families in Bethlehem. In partnership with the Bethlehem Rotary Club, Morning Star Rotary just welcomed an exchange student from Poland, and a Liberty High School graduate just left for his year in Spain. Both boys are settling into their respective new families, and they're already making friends and beginning to embrace their important roles as global ambassadors in their new communities.

But, OK, a year-long international exchange isn't for everyone. That's why Rotary sponsors (i.e., offers free) so many other programs that transform the lives of young people, their families and our communities.

We offer three-week, short-term international exchanges in the summer. Two Freedom High School students receive \$1,000 scholarships that are named for exceptional public servants in our Rotary family. Rising seniors can attend Camp Neidig, a three-day sleepaway camp to empower student leaders. Rising eighth graders who do not have access to STEM enrichment activities can attend a three-night residential camp, featuring a curriculum that is written by the SETI Institute (a nonprofit contractor for NASA.) And we work with the wonderful staff at Bethlehem Area Vocational-Technical School and other high schools to enter students into Rotary's Four-Way Speech Contest, which offers prize money.

What's really powerful about Rotary youth programs is that when a student participates, they're not just engaging with that program. They're also supported by our Rotary members, who are prominent and dedicated community members and who care deeply about the present and future of the Lehigh Valley. Students and families can also tap into Rotary's worldwide network of 46,000 clubs and 1.4 million members who share this vision: "Together, we see a world where people unite and take action to create lasting change — across the globe, in our communities and in ourselves." Note that while I'm writing specifically about Morning Star Rotary's programs, most of the local Rotary Clubs in the Lehigh Valley offer similar opportunities.

I encourage parents and students to explore these opportunities, not only for personal growth but also as a means to empower your families, and to give back to our community through your

students. Together, we can support our youth in becoming proactive leaders who embody the Rotary motto of “Service Above Self.”

For more information about these programs, reach out to me at RotaryJBL29@gmail.com

Jennifer Cunningham is the youth programs coordinator for the Morning Star Rotary Club and serves as a director on the board. She’s also a proud Army mom and a proud Lehigh University parent.