

This month has given me many great opportunities to travel and connect with the people around me.

I've really bonded with my two little host sisters, and care for them more than I thought possible. They are like little barnacles and stick to me wherever I go, but are absolutely hilarious and great to have around. I've spent quite a bit of time with them, mostly babysitting, while my host parents are working, and love getting to watch them grow up a bit more every day.

I had the chance to go to the University of Wollongong with the other kids in my year. As well as checking out the uni, we also had a bit of time to explore the up and coming city. I had a blast and loved being able to see the difference in higher education between America and Australia.

I also took a trip to Newcastle with my counsellor and his family, to move his daughter back into Newcastle University. This allowed me to see more of this uni and also meet up with one of the other exchange students, Meri, from Finland.

February was also the hottest month. We had a few very scary days when the fire danger was "catastrophic", the highest danger warning. There were quite a few fires in the surrounding area, which made everything very smoky and hard to see. On our drive back home from Newcastle, we followed six fire trucks and were stopped at almost every turn to make sure we wouldn't drive into a dangerous area. It's a very eery time and everyone is on edge, worried about the fires.

This past weekend was the Rylstone show, which is one of the biggest events of the year for a country town. They had competitions for almost everything including: chickens, sheep, cattle, horses, wood chopping, sculptures, paintings, fruits, vegetables, baked goods, wool, knitted pieces, and cars. They also had quite a few activities for families including, carnival games, amusement park rides, the young farmers challenge, tug of war, fireworks, and tons of food. The young farmers challenge was a relay race where the team had to roll up a swag, eat a dry weetbix, load two hay bales into a wheelbarrow and run 100 meters, load the hay into a trailer, hook up a trailer onto a four wheeler, reverse the trailer, eat a raw egg, and then climb under a tarp. I didn't participate in this challenge, but it was very amusing and very Australian. I did however join the tug of war challenge, and my team lost in about five seconds. It was all good fun, and incredible to see what such a small town can produce.

Two of the members from my rotary club, Robbie and Klaus, invited me sailing this week. My counsellor brought me down to Sydney on Monday and that night Robbie, Klaus, Wayne (a member of their crew), and I went sailing on Pittwater, a spot famous for its racing. We had strong winds, calm water, and a great time. Robbie and Klaus are members of the Royal Yacht Club in Broken Bay, so we went back to the yacht club for dinner after. There I met a crew member of Australia II, the boat that won the America's Cup in 1983. He gave me a Royal Yacht Club shirt and their sponsor's cap. I also met a young girl who won gold in the 420 in the Athens special olympics. This was such an incredible night that I will always remember. The next day we explored a bit of the area and accidentally stumbled upon the filming of a famous Australian TV show "Home and Away".