

I landed in Sydney on August 6th, and my counselors, David and Helen Fuller, picked me up at 7 am. After my flight, I was pretty exhausted, but David and Helen made sure to keep me busy so I could stay up. We went out for breakfast, took a ferry around Sydney Harbor, and saw a bit of the Blue Mountains on our way home. I stayed with them for a week just to get settled. We made sure I was registered for school, my bus was sorted, I signed up for a bank account, and got my new sim card working. I unfortunately caught a cold on the plane and basically slept the entire week.

But I did get a bit of insight on Rylstone and Kandos during this week. I will be living primarily in Rylstone, but I attend school in Kandos. Rylstone has about 800 people (well now 801), and is mostly farm land. It's basically the middle of nowhere. David asked me on our way back from Sydney if I was afraid he was going to take me somewhere to kill me, because we were just driving through mountains at that point. I told him I was fine because there were still lines on the road, he just laughed and told me to wait. There are no lines on the road anywhere in Kandos, and right now I have to take a dirt road to get to my first host family's home.

Speaking of them, started with my new host family on August 13th. My host mom, Tina, is a part time cop; my host dad, Ross, manages the local swimming pool; and I have three host siblings: Hayley, Carly, and Rory. Hayley is 15 and in year 10, one year below me, and is just about to go on a short term exchange to Italy in October. Carly is 14 and in year 9. Rory is 11 and in year 7. They live on a farm about 20 minutes outside on Rylstone. So we are pretty isolated, but it gives me more time with the family. Carly and Rory are both very keen on showing me everything in Australia. They love having a new person to hang out with and go crazy.

School is definitely different. First of all, the school has about 200 kids from year 7 to year 11. Also, I've been placed into year 11 so I can continue with the same group of kids in January. But, it's been difficult. Because I graduated a year early, I was used to being with kids older than me. Now being placed with kids younger than me, everyone seems very immature and childish. I've also found that there is a complete lack of respect in the school. Kids don't respect their teachers, their school, or the value of their education. But the teachers don't seem to respect the kids either. This is a hard concept for me to grasp after coming from a very academically based high school. Right now I am taking textiles, where I'm learning to sew; hospitality, where I get to cater for the school cafe; maths; english; chemistry; and PD/H/PE, which is basically a human anatomy class. In addition, Helen and I have talked about a few ways for me to become more involved in the school. I think I may start to mentor or tutor a few students, or perhaps try some more project based learning experiences.

I've found that people here are just much more welcoming. At my first Rotary meeting, I was invited out sailing, and invited to Canberra, the capital of Australia. But it's more than that. In Pittsford, people will ask you how you are or what you are doing in hopes of being able to one up you. But here, people genuinely want to know how I am or what I'm doing. Everyone wants me to 'speak American' to them, and be their best friend from America. It's pretty amazing, because I see how much the community really values me, and me being here.

This past weekend, I had my first inbound weekend, and got to meet all the other exchange students. There are 15 other exchange students, and everyone is so kind. It was great to be able to make friends with people who are going through the exact same thing you are.

I really am enjoying my time here, now that I've gotten used to driving on the wrong side of the road. I've met some truly incredible people and seen some of the most beautiful parts of the world. I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to all of you who have helped me be able to have this experience.