



Serena

from Mississauga-West
to
Taiwan

“This experience has always been about family.”

Has it really been 6 months since a scared, nervous girl walked through airport security alone, dragged her luggage through a long, quiet hallway alone, and flew over oceans and continents alone, nervously and excitedly awaiting what she could only imagine would become the biggest adventure of her life? 6 months? If anything, that day feels like years ago, yet the past 6 months have flown by so fast it could have been yesterday that I first set foot in Taiwan.

Shortly after my last BeaverTail, I switched host families for the first time. The day was nerve-wracking, and I cried more than once, wondering how three months could have passed so quickly. That evening, all three of my host families gathered together for dinner to commemorate the switch; before anyone else arrived, my first host mom told me since I was their daughter, they were paying for everyone’s meal, as a way to say, “Thank you for taking care of my daughter for the next three months. Please take good care of her.” That brought more tears to my eyes and in the end, leaving my first family in Taiwan was almost as difficult as leaving Canada.



Saying goodbye to my first host mom – with many tears.



However, my new host family welcomed me with open arms, and soon I will be in the same position once more; wondering how the time passed so fast, and how I will ever be able to leave the people I have grown so close to.

My second host family, with my 弟弟/Dìdì (younger brother) and my 姐姐/ji ji (older sister)!

February 2020

With my second host family, I've visited more beautiful beaches, climbed mountains (14 total, I think), made lasting memories, learned new lessons, and discovered more about Taiwan, the world, and myself.



The President of my host club and me!

In late December Rotary held an annual District meeting, which for my Rotary club meant endless dance practice to prepare for our performance. The evenings we spent together practicing brought me closer to the Rotarians in my club, and since then I have had more fun spending time with them than I ever expected. One night, in particular, we all went to dinner at a hotel in the mountains, where we sang karaoke and danced well into the night. That night held another first - the first time I understood everything in Chinese, even if the speaker wasn't talking to me!!

Even though we performed in front of at least a thousand people, the bounce in my step came from excitement rather than nervousness.

My Rotary club, just before we performed our dance.



With so many of us, after so many hours of practice, I felt confident we would do well. And we did! In a video I saw later, my friend's host mom can be heard saying "Lina looks like she's having too much fun", and I certainly was!

My club won an award for our performance!!!

The Christmas season commenced with an Exchange Student Chinese Talent competition for everyone in the District. My first host mom told me about the event in October, except she called it a singing competition, so I spent one-month learning how to sing and the second month practicing a Chinese song called “我要我們在一起/ Wǒ Yào Wǒmen Zài Yìqǐ.” Two weeks before the day, I learned that any type of talent was allowed as long as it involved Chinese, but I decided to sing my song anyways.



Miaoli Area Exchange students at the Chinese Talent Competition, with red envelopes courtesy of our Rotarians!!

If you had told me before I went on Exchange that someday I would sing in front of a banquet hall full of people, I would have thought you were crazy. But I sang the whole song, with only minor mistakes, and even had fun while doing it! Though I didn't win, I was proud of how much I'd grown since leaving Canada. Something that was once my worst nightmare became something I could do confidently and even enjoy. Since then, I have sung my song and others many times for Rotarians, who somehow always seem to have a karaoke set on hand and ready to go before I realize what's happening.

After everyone's performance, we all excitedly congratulated each other and ate dinner. Then, the Rotex announced they had a Christmas surprise for us!! We all sat on the edge of our seats, anticipating what the surprise could be.

Suddenly, a couple and a young girl appeared on the projector screens, and another Exchange student stood up, her hand over her mouth in shock. The same shade of brown hair and similar facial features shared between the young girl on the screen and the Exchange student in front of me brought the puzzle together; the Rotex had collected videos from our families to wish us Merry Christmas. I cried a little bit then, overwhelmed by their thoughtfulness and the knowledge that I was going to see my family's videos. When my family's faces finally did appear on the screen, along with my friends, and so many other people I love, I couldn't hear anything they said because I was crying too hard. My first Christmas away from my family, and yet one where I could feel their love stronger than ever.

I never expected a year away to bring me closer to my family, but in so many ways, this experience has always been about family; finding new family, learning to live without your natural family, and learning who you want to become because of those people.

I've heard many say that students come back a different person after their Exchange; maybe it's that you leave your family as a child, and come back as something closer to an adult, someone who can connect with their parents on a different level, now that you know what it means to live without them. This experience has opened my eyes to just how much love there is in my life, and how lucky I am to share it with so many people. Just this realization is something I can never forget, a knowledge that I will carry with me for the rest of my life, and one that has already changed my life for the better in more ways than I know.

My classmates and I on Christmas day!



As Taiwan is one of the few countries that doesn't officially celebrate Christmas, my expectations for the day itself were rather low; I went to school like any other Taiwanese student. In my own act of celebration, though, I decided to wear a Christmas hat for the whole day. Many of my classmates laughed when they saw me in the morning and called me cute (“栗娜很可愛/Lìnà hěn kě'ài”). However, our principal had a different reaction - I saw him before class to wish him a Merry Christmas, and he commented on

my hat and gave me some hand warmers (my first Christmas present!). Later that day, he gave a presentation to the school, wearing a Christmas hat exactly like mine!

Later, I met up with the American Exchange student at my school, Callie from California. Together we came up with a brilliant idea: if our classmates didn't know how to celebrate Christmas, why couldn't we bring the celebration to them?

Quickly, we asked our teachers if we could go to the grocery store across the street, and to our surprise, they said yes (I don't think you're supposed to leave the campus during school hours, but Exchange student benefits). We hurried over to buy a sack full of small candies and chocolates. Back at school, we burst into our classroom, me in my Santa hat, and Callie in reindeer antlers that I just happened to find in my backpack and announced ourselves to be “聖誕老公公/shèngdàn lǎogōnggōng” (Santa Claus)!! Our classmates appreciated the snacks and our teacher took the opportunity to have us share with the class what Christmas is like in our countries. In the second class we went to, my homeroom class, we forgot to say “聖/Shèngdàn” (Christmas) and just introduced ourselves as “老公公/lǎogōnggōng”, which means Grandpa. Everyone got a good laugh out of that.

After lunch, my classmates surprised me in return; my teacher had organized a Secret Santa food-only gift Exchange, and just about every single classmate gave me a portion of their gift. I went home with more snacks than I could carry, and my host siblings were over the moon about all the free food.



All the snacks my classmates gave me!!

On the way home from school, I stopped at a tea store, and after seeing my Santa hat the cashier gave me the “Merry Christmas” balloon from the display at the front of the store. Even between strangers, the Christmas spirit is contagious – or perhaps it’s just another case of Taiwanese generosity?



My host families and my counsellor!!

I ate Christmas dinner with my counsellor and my first two host families. I still missed my first family since I had switched not too long ago and having everyone together again made the day really feel like Christmas. Later that night, I realized my first Christmas in a country that doesn’t even celebrate the holiday was full of more love, generosity, and kindness than I could ever have expected.

Just a few days later, all 27 Exchange students of District 3501 piled into a bus and headed to Taipei to see the famous fireworks lit off of Taipei 101. When the moment finally came, thousands of people all counted down from 50 together, and after the last second, my first words spoken in the New Year became, “Did you eat the grapes?!” (I can only tell you to ask a Spanish person to explain that).





Though the fireworks were spectacular, my favourite part of the two-day trip was the time spent in the bus with my friends, just talking and laughing and singing and learning nursery rhymes in Finnish. To me, no matter how much I do or how much I experience, the most incredible part of Exchange will always be the people I am lucky enough to know while I'm here. The best place to see the world, make new experiences, and learn how to grow up, is side by side some amazing and extraordinary friends who are ready to take every step with you.

Then, before I knew it, the winter vacation was upon us – 4 weeks with no school and an incredible celebration around the corner!!! The arrival of Chinese New Year, marked by fireworks at every time of day (3 in the morning, 7 am, noon, you name it), became one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life.

At the last meeting of the year, my Rotary club presented me with fancy red envelopes, meant to bring luck, and 揮/Huī chūn (red banners). They even gave me one from the Presidential office of Taiwan!! Signed by President Tsai Ing-wen herself!! I know I will treasure their gifts for the rest of my life.



*My Rotary Club and the gifts they gave me!!
(and The Canadian flags I gave them)*

We spent the last day of the lunar year with my host dad's side of the family, as per tradition. At the end of the day, I had my first experience with another tradition of Chinese New Year - 紅包/Hóngbāo, or red envelopes!! Parents give red envelopes to their children during Chinese New Year, and what's special is the envelope's contents – money!! However, usually the children must perform in order to receive the envelope. In this case, we had to say 3 puns using the Chinese Zodiac of 2020, the 鼠/Shǔ, rat. When my turn arrived, I made three feeble attempts at puns in Chinese, which the adults decided would be passable – if I also said three nice things about each of them. I went around the table, calling each of them beautiful and generous and the best auntie or uncle ever, until I got to the last person, my host dad. Having already named everyone else the nicest or the most handsome, there was nothing else I could say except, "I help you do the dishes!". They all laughed and deemed I had done enough to earn the Hóngbāo's.



The next day, in a car overstuffed with snacks, blankets, 3 over-excited teenagers, and 2 sleep-deprived parents, we headed off to Pingtung, the southernmost county in Taiwan. In keeping with tradition, in which women must sleep in their parents' house for the first two days of the New Year, we spent three days there with my host grandparents, who are farmers of 蓮霧/Lián wù (wax apples). Every night, the teenagers stayed up late playing card games and singing (which Taiwanese people love to do) until the early morning. Many of the cousins were actually from New Zealand, so they were fluent in English, but we spoke exclusively Chinese. I'm proud to say they never had to translate for me! Except on the very last day, when one read the label on a bottle of maple syrup I gave them as a parting present, and surprised me - for some reason it never occurred to me that they would speak with a New Zealand accent!!

Pingtung!!!

We spent the rest of the days hiking around the beautiful parks of Pingtung, including Kenting National Park. My host 阿媽/Āmā (grandmother) took a liking to me and asked me lots of questions and told me stories about her youth. The other adults were shocked to hear me speaking with Āmā, and I didn't understand why until they told me she understands Mandarin but speaks only Taiwanese! Taiwanese is a completely separate language, though very similar to Mandarin. I had noticed it was really difficult to understand Āmā, but I assumed she just had a very heavy accent. As it turns out, after hearing Taiwanese so often I unwittingly picked it up! Then everyone spoke Taiwanese more than Mandarin, and I felt like it was September again, when I spent most of my time nodding, confused but trying my best to understand. It was an incredible reminder of how far I've come – and never did I ever dream of learning Taiwanese!! But now, I know a few phrases, and maybe I'll learn some more just to see the look on the locals' faces... a 外國人/Wàiguó rén (foreigner) speaking Taiwanese!



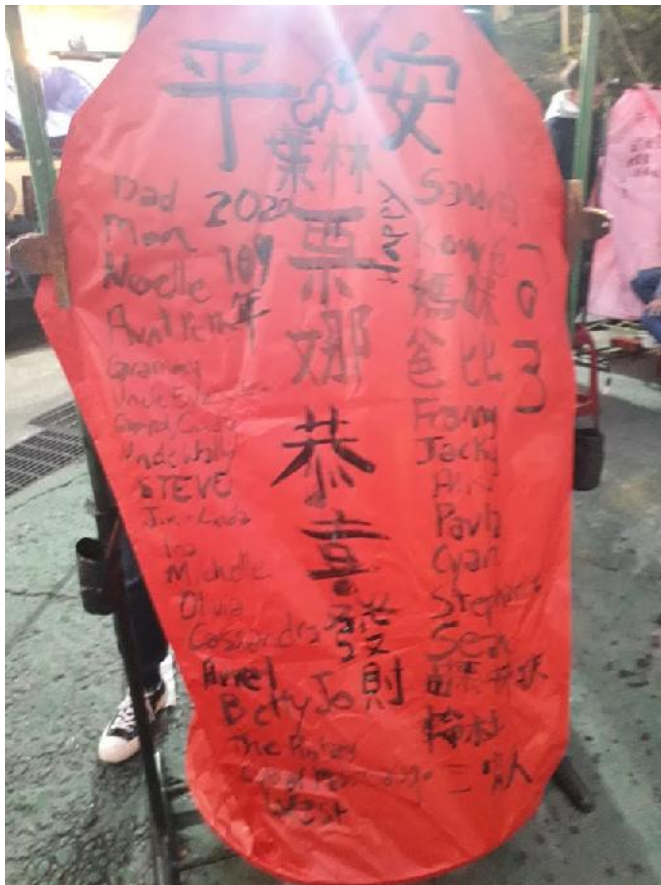
Back in Miaoli, there were more celebrations just around the corner – and my favourite, the upcoming Lantern Festival (元宵/Yuánxiāo jié, which directly translated means 'Rice Ball Day'). To celebrate the 15th day of the first month of the new year, we ate 湯圓/Tāngyuán (what used to be a rice ball but is now a dumpling).

According to tradition, you become a year older after you eat a Tāngyuán on Yuánxiāo jié. I ate three, so I guess I'll be going home to Canada already twenty years old!



Dragon Dance!

We also watched a parade in the square, where we watched 舞龍/Wǔ long, a traditional Dragon Dance. During the dance, bystanders lit fireworks at the feet of the performers, and suddenly the dragon was engulfed in fire and smoke!! The performers bravely ventured on, and later I learned they intentionally had people almost set fire to their feet. My host mom told me that if I was lucky, Rotary would have the Exchange students learn a similar dance for a performance in March. I think anyone who survives that performance burn-free is definitely lucky!



My host family also took me to light lanterns for Yuánxiāo jié. Each of us painted one side of the lantern with our wishes for the new year. On my side, I wrote the names of everyone I could think of that I care about, and 平安/Píng'ān (safety and wellbeing) (to the Rotary Club of Mississauga West, and District 7080, you guys were on there too!). My host mom wrote the names of my siblings and I, and then wrote “high academics”, saying if we wanted a chance of good grades, we needed any help we could get.

The Lantern Festival! This is my side of the lantern

A lot of Exchange is firsts; from the exhilarating firsts, to the nerve-wracking firsts, to the mundane, ordinary firsts, the firsts that make locals go, "Really?! You've never done this before?!". Even six months into Exchange, there is still an abundance of firsts to keep me busy learning. Just this evening I experienced another first; the first time I made homemade hand sanitizer, using Aloe Vera plants from the garden, and 95% alcohol. All of the aloe vera I've ever seen comes from a bottle, so it was truly baffling when my mom came in with an armload of the plant and told me to start peeling.

Even though each new first still surprises me, I'm no longer nervous and unprepared for how to deal with them. At a Rotary gathering, some Rotarians who had seen a picture of me playing a guzheng (a Chinese stringed instrument) assumed I knew how to play, and immediately set me up in front of the instrument, gave me sheet music I have no idea how to read (very different from Western sheet music!), and eagerly gathered around, hoping for a performance. In the past, I would have panicked, but I stayed cool as a cucumber, and played around with random melodies on the guzheng until they were satisfied. Another time, I sang a Chinese song and played the piano for them, and the performance went terribly. But still, I was happy, because Exchange has taught me the most important thing is that I try my best. If I give something my best effort, then at the end of the day if something doesn't happen the way it was supposed to, I can still be proud of myself. This is a mentality I am learning to live by now, and every day I see the benefits from it, in myself and in others who appreciate my efforts, even if my Chinese isn't the best, or I don't always know what I'm doing, or I make many mistakes along the way. As long as I tried my best, I know I can be happy with the outcome.

When I look back on the past six months, I can't believe how much has happened in what feels like such a short time. Even in this novel of a BeaverTale, I couldn't even cover half of everything that happened in the last three months. I am so grateful for the first half of this year, and the next five months I still have ahead of me, and I am so, so grateful for everyone who made this experience possible. Thank you to my natural family, my friends in Canada and Taiwan, my 3 amazing host families, the Rotary Club of Mississauga West, District 7080 and everyone on the RYE committee, The Rotary Club of Miaoli Central, District 3501 and their RYE committee, and all the Rotarians who work tirelessly for us Exchange students. Your names were all written on my lantern, and when I looked at the lantern floating slowly into the sky, I thought of all of you, and everything everyone did to give me the chance to be here. Thank you, all Rotarians, for giving your best to Rotary and showing me how to do the same, and thank you to all my families in Canada and Taiwan, for believing in me and supporting me and giving me this chance to grow and learn and live in a year that is changing my whole life.

Until next time – who knows what I'll have to share with you then!!

February 2020

Sincerely,

Serena

林 Lín (my second host family's last name)

栗 Lì

娜 Nà

P.S. If you want to hear more about my Exchange, check out my blog at <https://srye.home.blog/> . There, I have more pictures, videos and (somewhat) more frequent updates!



Paintball!!



February 2020



*My attempt at Calligraphy
"Miaoli Central Rotary Club's daughter Lina"*



