



**Katie**  
**from**  
**Georgetown**  
**to**  
**Brazil**

*“Exchange: The Gift of Life”*

I have been on exchange for just over three months now, and it has been one of the most amazing experiences I have ever had. I live in a city called Blumenau in Santa Catarina Brazil. At the end of this month I will be changing families for the first time this year. To say that I am learning a lot from my exchange would be an understatement, as would saying that famous phrase “Time flies”.

Time is not the only thing that changes during exchange. In leaving Canada I introduced myself to new cultures, friends, challenges, emotions, food, and innumerable other things as well. Summarizing even just three months of this journey is nearly impossible, so I will make a comparison to help you understand, even if it is a little strange. Being on exchange is much like being pregnant (although obviously, especially for a teenage girl, this is the better option).

Typically people ask new or expecting parents when their situations begin “feeling real”. In exchange student terms a common answer could be the moment you stepped away from your parents at the airport, or the first time you met your host family. Both of these moments had a great impact on me. Leaving Canada was my first time travelling alone. I was lucky to arrive in Brazil at the same time as another student in my district from the United States. We walked side by side (or as close as one can get with multiple giant suitcases) into the throng of excited Rotarians and future families. I met all of my hosts for the year that day, and even though we could barely communicate, the smiles, hugs, and cheek kisses made everything feel better. I couldn’t wait to get to know everyone! To answer the question though, I might be better

adjusted to the warm Brazilian greetings by now, but I doubt that my situation will ever stop feeling at least slightly surreal.

For students beginning an exchange, confusion is just a part of life. Getting adjusted to the culture was not as difficult as it could have been because I am living in a region with a lot of European influence. Little things still catch me off guard, but not being allowed to put toilet paper in the bowl is not a matter of great concern. Even the weather was the same when I arrived. The confusion, which I am happy to say is starting to ease off, mostly comes from the inability to communicate. Not knowing where you are, what you are doing, or exactly who the woman you just called “Mãe” is can mess with a person. My Portuguese certainly is not perfect, but after such a short time I am proud that I can usually express myself and maintain conversations.

The first thing any traveller discovers is that food represents society. Like any pregnant woman with cravings, sometimes I eat food I do not understand, and other times I crave something I typically would not. A lot of the time I have no idea what is being served to me, but I am very happy to say that Brazilian food so far has been excellent! Every visitor needs to try Brigadeiro, and if you are offered Churrasco do not limit what you try by thinking barbecue is the same around the world. There is a reason this country is famous for barbecue! My mealtimes have shifted, and the amount of food I eat as well. Luckily I have plenty of exercise options; right now I am taking dance classes and Zumba!

One of the main drawbacks of having kids is the side effect known as mood swings. As an exchange student, this is no exception. Living away from home and experiencing so many new things causes a whirlwind of emotions. I hadn't expected to find new emotions during my year away, but there are quite a few that have showed up. Most of the time the mixture is impossible to describe in the moment I feel it. One example being the difficulty I had when I tried to explain to my host mom that I suddenly cried the first time she hugged me for longer than a greeting because she gives great “Mom Hugs”. It can be expected that not every feeling is of happiness, and the word “saudade” (similar to homesickness) is my best friend, but also my worst enemy. I would never dream of changing these sentiments though, because the moments of elation are incredible!

This is probably the most obvious comparison I am going to make. Pregnancy is literally the process of creating life, and the international exchange program allows students to experience something uncannily similar. When you step off of a plane into a new country, culture, and group of people, everything changes. I no longer have a home; I have many! At least for a while, I cannot say “Mom” or “Dad” without confusing someone about which parent I am speaking of. The new friends I am making in school and out are one of my favourite parts about the exchange program. There are six other Rotary exchange students in my city, and our group feels

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like family. One of the advantages to being dropped into a new situation is that nobody knows you, so you start to become the person you want to be. In my case, I am already noticing that I am more outgoing than I ever was before, and plan on bringing this new trait back to Canada with me when I return!

While every child is unique, the process of creating one certainly is not. There is a lot of history in this program. It is such a privilege to be forming the newest generation of Rotary Exchange Students. It was also an honour when I met the rebound exchange student who lived with my grandparents 34 years ago during his year abroad. For my first big trip of the exchange I travelled by myself to meet the current President of the Rotary Club of Montes Claros, my almost exchange uncle Alvaro! The tourism was fun, but my favourite memory is undoubtedly the video call we made with my Canadian family. An exchange family is a magical thing to have, and it makes the world seem smaller and friendlier. Not many people can say they helped reunite multiple generations of exchange students with natural and host families; even fewer can meet a stranger and already feel like they know them!

These three months flew by in a whirl, and I suspect the rest of the year will go even faster. Brazil is a magnificent country and its people are no exception! Certainly, being an exchange student is not easy, but there is nothing else in the world that can compare to the experiences I am having here. I am growing, learning so much, and making memories and connections to last a lifetime. I might as well be supporting an extra human in terms of the immense amount of living (and eating) I am doing here, but I would not change it for the world!

Thank you Rotary and thanks also to my families. This is only my first Beaver Tale, and I have been gone a short three months, but I already truly believe that my exchange is the best thing that has -and maybe ever will- happen to me!

Até mais,

*Katie Fry*