



# Kyle

from

Mississauga West

to

Finland

*"To my friends that have returned to their countries,  
we will meet again soon, "Separated, but not broken."*

6 months, 8 days, 20 hours and 2 minutes since I arrived in Finland, and 6 months 9 days since I left Canada. The 6 month mark has just passed and while it was an awesome feat, it was also slightly terrifying at the same time, half of my exchange has passed and my time in this incredible country is counting down. Where did the time go? Even at this point I can remember perfectly first coming to Finland and seeing a whole new world. A way of life I would have never experienced if it wasn't for Rotary Youth Exchange.

When I last wrote it was just at the 3 month mark; a lot has happened since then. Where I left off, it was just before the Rotary Lapland tour. I can come back to you now saying that one trip has been one of the best experiences of my exchange as of this moment! For 5 days, almost every exchange student was together again and for some, the first time. The tour started with a bus ride that lasted roughly 2 days for those traveling from southern Finland; luckily I live further north and my bus ride lasted about one day and night. This is a good and a bad thing in this situation; good because I am not stuck in a bus for too long, bad because I am not stuck in a bus with awesome exchange students for too long. Every moment spent on these tours with them is precious, always remember this! Luckily the bus I was on was the first one to arrive to the hotel in Lapland. We all had time to stretch our legs, get some fresh air, unpack and most of all enjoy the precious daylight. At the time the tour took place, the amount of daylight we had north of the Arctic Circle was about 5 hours in total. When the rest of

the buses arrived, we ran to hug and greet our VERY tired friends as they finished their long bus ride (side note: we may have also attacked them with snowballs). For some of the students from warmer countries that are living in the south of Finland, this was the first time they had seen and were able to actually touch snow, and there was lots of it! The expression of joy some showed is something that I will remember for a long time.

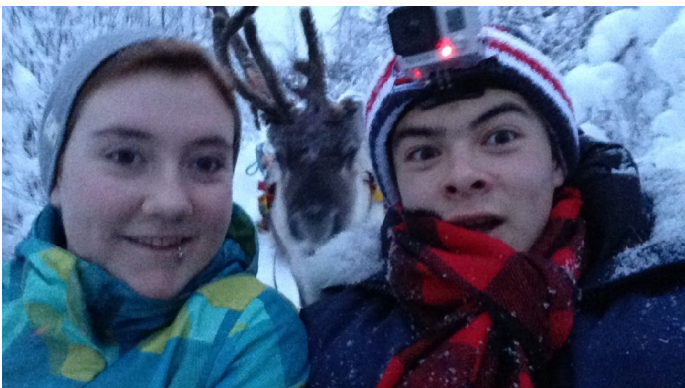
The first day was spent mainly getting settled in, reuniting with friends and playing in snow. The next day, we had the chance to go to a local ski hill for a good part of the day. Here students had the chance to either ski, snowboard or cross country ski. I spent the day snowboarding with some of my best friends, and getting to know some amazing people as well.



One of the coolest parts of being on the ski hill that morning was getting to see the sun rise at 10AM, one of the brightest and most beautiful sunrises I have ever had the pleasure to experience. Not only was it a glowing bright orange and red, being on the tallest hill in the area allowed me to see the beautiful Finnish Lapland landscape. As far as the eye could see, white hills covered with tall, skinny snow-covered trees basking in an orange glow. Words cannot describe how breathtaking this view was. I spent this time surrounded by close friends, all standing in silence as we witnessed

the beauty of our host country. The day on the slopes concluded in the early afternoon, just as the sun was beginning to set.

Later that evening, as Finnish tradition we went to a sauna, and then decided it would be a good idea to roll around and play in the snow fresh out of the hot sauna. On the next day, we started off by going snowshoeing to a small farm where we rode in REINDEER pulled sleighs. This was one of the coolest things ever! I felt like Santa for a



little bit! As if it couldn't get better, "But wait! There's more!" right after that we went dog sledding at the second largest husky farm in Finland! The Lapland Tour ended with a cozy night and dance, with about 130 students in a tiny house surrounding a

fire place dancing like crazy to Mexican and Brazilian music. As far as which night was the most fun, definitely this one.



On the day that we were leaving to go back to our own cities, we had the opportunity to go to the border of Sweden; this border was literally just a bridge with a sign in the middle showing which side you stood on. It felt pretty cool to stand in 2 countries at the same time!

The last big stop we made along the way was in a town located right on the Arctic Circle called Rovaniemi. It was here where we got to visit "Joulupuki" the Finnish Santa Claus (the real one according to every Fin I asked about this). All in all, he was a really cool guy, and spoke about 7 languages! This was not your average mall Joulupuki, he was the real deal!

The next big thing that happened was Christmas! This had to be one of the most interesting differences from what I'm used to. Usually in Canada there tons of Christmas stuff the whole month of December. Movies, commercials, sales, all month. In Finland, they still have sales but only really begin to celebrate and get ready for the day just a few days before. My host family put up the tree just 1 day before Christmas Eve. Perhaps this was the most different part, in Finland you celebrate on Christmas Eve. You eat a big meal, have relatives come over and open your presents. However, your parents don't just give them to you, Joulupuki comes into the house and personally hand delivers each present. Christmas day was mainly spent just relaxing, enjoying some time off and eating whatever remained of the feast from the night before.



On the 26th, I was on a train headed to Helsinki (Finland's capital) to meet with some of the other Canadian exchange students to see the Canada vs USA World Juniors match. By the time we all met we were decked out in Canada stuff! Hats, mittens, flannel, socks, shirts and of course flags! Everything was Canadian theme in an attempt to make it onto TV. Luckily for us, one of the Canadian's sponsoring club presidents came to Helsinki for the game, and he offered to take us out to



dinner! At the time we had all met up, we quickly started to realize that we were not the only Canadians there. In fact about 6,000 Canadians traveled to Helsinki just for the games! At this point our chances of getting on TV were slim to none; it seemed every Canadian was dressed just like us or even more extreme! Although this was a minor setback, to be in the arena with all those Canadians really brought out our Canadian spirit. The atmosphere was incredible! At least 80% of the crowd was Canadian, the stands were a sea of red and white. The crowd was chanting for our boys on the ice; and possibly the most Canadian chant ever happened, that being "MAPLE SYRUP \*clap\* \*clap\* \*clap clap\*!". As much laughter as this cheer brought, It got more people on their feet and screaming at the players. In the end, it was a close game, but unfortunately team USA won the match with 2 goals in the last few minutes. It was a major upset to the whole stadium, at one point one of my fellow Canadian exchangers broke out in tears.

The games did not end there though. I was able to stay in Helsinki for a whole week and go to see 2 more Canada games. I introduced one of my Mexican friends to the game and he loved every second of it. It was very special to see him cheering for our team with us. The last game I went to I brought one of my Friends to a game as well, where we ran into the club president that took the Canadian exchangers out to dinner just a few nights before. Aside from going to hockey games, I was going around Helsinki with the other students just taking in the sites, trying new places to eat and spending time with some of the oldies that would be leaving soon. We went skating at an ice rink in the middle of the city a few times and visited a modern art museum that fortunately for us was free for students.



In addition to being in the city so long, I got to spend New Year's Eve in Helsinki too! Being the largest city in the country, the largest fireworks display in the country took place here. Once again with exchange students, we walked through the city and tried to get to the main market place where the fireworks would go off at the stroke of midnight. Under normal circumstances, this would be possible with a large crowd; but this time there were an additional 6,000+ people in the crowd because of the World Juniors. With midnight coming fast, we

were rushing to find a place for the countdown.

With 15 left in the year, we finally found a spot. We ended up on a hill in a park just on the harbour, with a view of the whole city skyline. As each minute passed, anticipation and excitement began to build. In the last few minutes, we gathered close and listened to a song that had a huge significance to all of us, the Finland exchange song. Now the countdown began; all of us shouting in unison, "20,19,18,17..." The excitement could be felt as with each count we grew louder and louder "8, 7, 6..." At this moment I looked around at all my friends and realized, this was the best way I could have ever imagined to welcome in the New Year. "5, 4, 3, 2, 1, HAPPY NEW YEAR!" we all screamed as the New Year began. Fireworks went off all over the city and behind us a little higher on the hill. Explosions of bright lights erupted in the sky all around us, it seemed as though we were in the centre of the all the celebration!

Out of all the things I felt that night, the weirdest yet best thing that I felt even though I was freezing and in the middle of a park; I felt like I was home. With people from all around the world I would have never met, so many friendships and things I would have never gotten to experience if it wasn't for Rotary Youth Exchange. Out of all the things I felt that night, the euphoria that washed over me made me realize, regardless of location or country, wherever I am, if I am with the people I love, I am home.

Just as my, and many others' exchange years were coming to the half way mark, the year for our oldies was just coming to an end. Due to the seasons difference in the southern hemisphere the Australian, Chilean and South African students had to leave us just as the New Year began. Even though we were only here for half of their exchange, we all treated them like our elders; they were the wise ones with experience in a foreign land and experience with what seemed like an impossible language in the beginning. They showed us the way and taught us the traditions of exchangers. All of us newbies looked up to them and went to them whenever we needed guidance. The thought of losing these people was heartbreaking. In such a short time, we bonded with them and made lifelong friendships. I guess it's true though, you never know what you have until it's gone. These were our friends, our family.



Going to the airport to say goodbye to them one last time was possibly the single hardest thing to do; while we were sad to see them go they were twice as bad. They had to leave not only us behind, but their new home and new life. As sad of a day as this was, the whole time we were in the airport we spent it dancing, talking, having fun. Just trying to make the most out of the last few precious moments we could share together.



As the final departure time came closer and closer, we hugged more, cried harder and made promises to see each other as soon as we could. I can still remember the last few moments spent with my best friends. Seeing them walk through the security check was unbearable. None of them wanted to leave. As sad as this was, I will never forget a conversation I had with my oldie Emma over pizza. What we both realized is just because we are separated, does not mean our friendships are broken. We have lifelong friends all over the world now, it's only a matter of time before we see each other again. "Separated, but not broken." As of now, my generation of exchangers are now oldies.



A week after our oldies left, the newbies arrived. It is time for us to be the wise ones in this country and pass down the traditions. All of this has happened so fast, it's hard to believe its halfway already. In one month, the RYE Finland Russia tour will take place. Once again, everyone is getting excited; we are all ready to meet each other again. It's just a matter of time now.

Thank you Rotary Club of Mississauga West District 7080. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I am making lifelong friendships and connections with incredible people I would have never met had it not been for Exchange. Thank you Rotary and all my host families, you have made this year possible. To my friends that have returned to their countries, we will meet again soon, I promise. "Separated, but not broken."

Kiitos Paljon Kaikille,

*Kyle*