



Kyle

from

Mississauga West

to

Finland

“Our life was beginning, not our year.”

100 days, 20 hours, 29 minutes and 47 seconds since I came to my new home, Finland. 101 days since I left Canada. Just over 3 months that have passed since my exchange year began. The saying “Time flies when you are having fun”, has never made so much sense to me. Then again, a lot of things that I know now would never have made sense to me a year ago, when I signed up for exchange. Looking back, signing up for the Rotary Youth Exchange program has been the best decision of my life, no question about it!

I remember when I told my friends that I was accepted to an exchange program, their initial reaction all seemed to be “Don’t go! I’m going to miss you too much!” At first this was terrifying, my friends telling me not to do it; but I still wanted to it, something about seeing the world really had me. The first interview with Rotary had me nervous, just like the Bolton weekend interviews, announcement day, and most of all: DEPARTURE DAY! When I first got into the program, I never imagined departure day would actually arrive; it just seemed like a day in distant future.

So what happened between the time I joined the program and the day I left for Finland? Well with the Rotary Youth Exchange program in district 7080, there are 4 main events; the Bolton weekend (where you meet the rest of the awesome Outbounds and have your final interviews), Camp Wanakita (winter camping and sleeping in a Quinzee, probably the most Canadian thing ever!), announcement day (when you find out which country you will going to, also known as the most nerve wracking experience ever) and the Erindale weekend (where you get to see some or most of the oldies for the last time, and some of the Outbounds too). I noticed that the system that district 7080 is very

different from other districts. Other districts give you a list of countries that you can request, whereas 7080 students are evaluated in the interviews and at Camp Wanakita. Rotary then picks the country that they know we are best suited for. While terrifying as this may sound, it has actually turned out to be the biggest blessing in disguise. When I first found out I would be going to Finland on announcement day, all I could think was "What is in Finland?!" But, as Rotary always does, they picked the perfect country!

Due to schools starting in the middle of August, I left Canada on August 1st. After a whole week of drama, last minute packing, final goodbyes and many tears; I was on my way to the airport with the one and only red Canadian blazer! Thanks to the bright red jacket, I was able to find another Canadian going to Finland in no time! Later we met 2 other Canadians on the same flights as us. First flight was Toronto Pearson to Reykjavik Iceland, a 7 hour flight. This was the hard flight, the whole time I tried to sleep as much as I could. By as much sleep as I can I mean none whatsoever because I was just too excited! Finally, my journey had begun. Once we landed in Iceland it was moving as fast as we could to get to the next flight, which as it turned out we were half an hour early to. I guess we just couldn't wait to get to Finland! The flight to Helsinki was the easy flight, only 3 hours was nothing compared to the other flight. Once we arrived in the airport and claimed our bags we were immediately met with the incredible welcome from our oldies. The look on one their faces showed they were just as excited to meet us as we were to be in our new country. I was soon able to understand their excitement when I had the chance to welcome other exchangers as they arrived, the only way I could describe my experience doing this, is I felt pure joy and excitement. No longer were any of nervous of what would or could be, we were all living in the moment and trying to be a part of every moment of joy that took place in the airport. Our life was beginning, not our year.

After spending a few hours in the airport, we were on a bus to what is one of the greatest camps EVER, Karkku. For the first week, all us new Inbounds were here for a basic language camp, which was important considering 95% could not count to 5 if our lives depended on it. For 5 days, we studied basic vocabulary every day for 5 hours during the mornings then early afternoon. What happened after the lessons is what we lived for, the magical free time. During this free time I mainly played sports with every one; this sports included volleyball, basketball, floor hockey (we Canadians had to teach everyone how to play this one, and they loved it!), frisbee golf and last but not least football (soccer, when in Europe you are to refer to it as football). The things you could do if you didn't feel like sports were berry picking (very popular in Finland!), paddle boarding, taking a row boat out on the lake, exploring the camp and just socializing and making new friends. The bonds and friendships I made in this first

week alone have definitely lasted so far, and its amazing having those friends that you can relate to! In addition, if you ever feel like seeing more of Finland, there is always a friend to meet somewhere!

At this camp, the most Finnish thing that most, if not all of us did, was go to our first Finnish sauna. The sauna is typically heated to about 70-85 degrees, but for us (crazy) exchange students, we tried to get the sauna as hot as possible and see how long we could all take the heat. This is a classic sauna competition! What ensued after we had this brilliant idea was 10 teenagers running for their lives to jump into the sanctuary that was the cold water of the lake. Looking back at our decision, I still have no regrets!

Later in the week we had the experience of going to our first Finnish city, Tampere. Tampere is one of the biggest cities in Finland and definitely worth visiting. This was our first real exposure to the country we would be spending the next year in, and it was an amazing way to start. At the end of this week, everyone's first host family came to the camp to pick them up and bring them to the cities and towns where we are all living now. For me, this was the first time I ever met and talked to my host parents!



Currently, I am living with my second host family in the city of Kuopio, a large city by Finnish standards in the east, in the middle of the lake lands. When I was living with my first family, I lived in a small village outside the city by about 24km. Now I am just a 10 minute bike ride from the centre of the city! My first house was located on a lake, a very typical part of Finnish culture. It was here that I began to truly feel at home in this country. My first family and I became very close, after a while you start to forget they are hosting you, because you are part of their family. It was with this family that I had the incredible opportunity to go to ITALY and visit Rome and the Vatican with them on their family vacation. This was my first taste of central Europe.

The biggest difference I noticed was not the weather, but the food and attitudes of people. In Finland, people are generally quiet in public and respect the space of other people. In Italy, people were much louder (this seemed more normal to me) and comfortable being in closer proximities to others in public. The food in Finland is typically quite hardy and filling; whereas in Italy the food is much lighter, and more flavourful. While on this trip, I also had the opportunity to visit and go inside the Vatican. The inside of the Vatican was incredible! The statues and artifacts are all so interesting and rich in history. While this trip was incredible, there was a weird thing I

noticed when I returned to Finland. It felt like I was going back home, not to another country, but home.

The school system in Finland is one of the best in the world, and after 3 months I can see why. The schools here are not mandatory like in Canada, after the age of 15 you do not need to go to any more school, but it is instead the choice of whether the person wants to continue their education further. This leads to students that are responsible and self motivated to succeed. The maturity of all the people in the schools creates a great atmosphere for students. This is not to say that we don't have fun! The school that I attend is Kuopion Klassillinen Lukio, a specialized sports school. As it is a sports school, I have managed to make it into the sports line and participate in track and field training 3 times a week. My school was also renovated a few years ago, and the whole building is very modern; to add to the very modern feel of the school, the headmaster is also a technology enthusiast. He constantly brings cool new things to the school. In the main forum of the building, there are flat screen TVs every where, one of which is paired to a Wii for students to play on in-between classes. There are several gaming chairs spread around this area, 2 full size Ping Pong tables and a small room just for students to relax. My favourite thing in this forum however has to be the new addition 2 3D printers that students may use and print whatever they want for no charge, I already printed a new case for my GoPro, and plan to print many things in the future! The classes in the school are great but all my classes are in Finnish, so a little hard to understand at the moment, but slowly getting better. I have managed to make many friends at this school and get involved in several events so far. It is easy to say that I enjoy my school here much more than in Canada, regardless of the language barrier!



Soon all the exchange will be meeting again for the biggest Rotary trip of the year, The LAPLAND TOUR! Every time I talk to the other students it's always on our mind. It is the only time we will all see each other again. At the end of November, all the RYE students will take a bus and go north of the arctic circle. Here we will experience some traditional Finnish activities, such as; cross country skiing, eating

reindeer meat and best of all Avanto. Avanto is a Finnish tradition where you come out of the sauna and immediately jump into a hole cut in a frozen lake. The experience is said to be the best experience and the best feeling when you jump back into the sauna!

November, 2015

The pure excitement that has been building up amongst us all and the day is almost here.

Thank you Rotary Club of Mississauga West District 7080. Thanks to you I am half way around the world having experiences that I could have never fathomed before. I have made friends and am experiencing one of the best school systems in the world. Thank you Rotary for helping me to make my dreams come true. Another thanks I would like to give is to my host families, because of you we have warm and welcoming homes to stay in. Thanks to you Rotary and my host families, I am now living my life in a year, not my year in my life.

Thank you from Finland,

Kyle Cashin

UPDATE:

The horrible events in Paris took place just yesterday and most if not all the Exchange students and Europe have been shaken by these events. It has been a horrifying experience to see so many of my French friends this scared. Tension is running high in middle Europe and all around the world. This has only put more people on edge in addition to the immigrant crisis, Right now we are all mourning the losses of the attacks that took place; we can only hope our governments can find a solution to this problem.