

Hosting an exchange student provides cultural experience

Families that would like their children to experience different cultures can provide that experience without leaving home – by hosting a foreign exchange student.

International Experience-USA (iE-USA) is a nonprofit youth exchange organization that is always looking for host families. Director Laura Higgs was hooked on the experience as a teenager.

"I was an exchange student to Argentina when I was only 16, and after that, we hosted a girl from Turkey in my house during high school as well," Higgs said. "While I have also studied abroad for a year in college, it was my youth experience that inspired me to support these students and families, and get involved with youth exchange."

Higgs' early experience so impacted her life, she has devoted herself to helping other students and families come together.

"Seeing how serious iE-USA is about helping the students and families made me apply to be a coordinator, and I now am the Outbound Director to send American students abroad as well."

"There are so many different reasons why hosting a student is a good idea," Higgs said. "Families learn about their student's cultural norms and perspectives. For example, many were excited that they would have lockers at school here! Parents can model cultural acceptance and global service as a life lesson for their children, which helps prevent prejudice and racism."

"Families can look forward to a 'forever' international friendship, and I know this from personal experience. I have kept in touch with my host families and host sister for over 15 years now, and every person I have spoken to that hosted a long-term exchange student has found ways to either visit or communicate across the distance afterwards."

"In Europe, it is very common to travel and also host, so everyone knows it is an option. Here, I have talked to many students or fami-



Gaia, a foreign exchange student from Italy, spent the 2013-14 school year in Schertz.

lies who said they never knew that it was a possibility, before speaking to me.

"I believe some families might think they are 'too busy' to host, or 'not interesting enough' to host. In reality, all I ask is that you take care of the student like they were your own son or daughter, and keep them involved in your family routines no matter what those might be. Host families are not meant to be tour guides, especially for a long term exchange, they are meant to be real parents who will help a student find ways to get involved in real American life, like taking the bus to school!"

Volunteer families should provide three meals a day and a room to stay in. All other expenses are paid for by the student.

One student that went home with a lifetime of memories is Gaia, a foreign exchange student from Italy. She spent the 2013-14 school year in Schertz.

"I decided to be an exchange student because I love travelling and see new places, so for once I wanted to actually experience and learn about the culture of another country and not just being a tourist," Gaia said.

"Before leaving you don't really know what to expect. Everything is going to be new and different. You just hope that it will be fine and that you will get used to it quickly."

"One thing is for sure: it's been

harder than I thought, especially at the beginning, but it was totally worth it. It's been an awesome experience, and I wouldn't trade it for any reason!

"The school was truly my favorite part. American high schools are just like in the movies: Football players, cheerleaders, a lot of sports and activities that we don't have in Italian schools. It's really so much fun. I've never enjoyed going to school as much as I did this year! Plus, you'll never find a teacher who brings pizza and ice cream to his class in Italy."

"My favorite memories: When my host family and me went to choose and cut down our Christmas tree. In Italy we mostly use fake trees for Christmas, and it was great to experience this American tradition; when my school did the lip dub - the other foreign exchange students and me had a part in it. We were holding our flags, and we had our faces painted as our flags, and we were lip-singing part of the song 'Happy.' Plus, everybody was wearing the school colors and showing the school spirit. It was awesome! I'll never forget that day!"

If you would like to consider being a host family for this upcoming school year, you may call the local coordinator Laura Higgs at 802-522-7059, or email l.higgs@international-experience.net. Their website to apply or view students is www.ie-usa.org.