

The Things No One Told Me

Lori Ruhlman, mother of an outbound and host mother of an inbound

When we were preparing to send our daughter Jessica to Venezuela as a Rotary Exchange Student, I knew she would have a life-altering and amazing year. I looked forward to hosting Zuhey from Costa Rica. I knew that both girls would learn a new language and assimilate into a whole new culture. I knew that the world would become a smaller, friendlier place for all of us. Even as Jessica exchanged those first letters and emails with her family in Venezuela, and as I exchanged first emails with Zuhey in Costa Rica, the two formerly “foreign” countries started to become real to me. I felt bonded to a mother in Venezuela, who was accepting my daughter into her home. And I felt bonded to a mother in Costa Rica because I knew how her heart must feel as she prepared to let her daughter go. I was determined to greet and care for her daughter with the love and compassion I hoped someone would greet my own daughter.

I knew the experience of living in another country would test and sharpen the skills of the girls, and would turn them in to more flexible, adventurous, insightful human beings. I knew that the Rotary Program would facilitate all of that.

But there were things I didn’t know, that I would like to try to put into words now.

There is something in the structure of Rotary that could change the world, if only it could be applied to every day life. I am not just talking about the international component, although that is obviously the focus.

Rotary Exchange Students have the great opportunity to go live in another country ... to become immersed in another culture for a year of their lives. But there is more. They are given something else, something I couldn’t have imagined the power of, something very few people ever experience. It transcends place to the extent that it doesn’t matter to which country they travel. I witnessed this from two perspectives: my daughter in Venezuela and then Argentina, and Zuhey Lara Rojos in our home in the USA. And I saw it happen to many other students whom we came to know this year.

For one year of their lives, these students are given the gift of unconditional acceptance and love. Everyone they meet is eager to know them, from the families who open their doors, to the Rotarians who welcome them at the airport with a hug. The network of other Rotary students they meet from around the world also greet them with open arms. There are people in their schools, etc., who may not share this intense interest, of course. But anyone connected with Rotary in any way is greeting them with a common sense of purpose, a desire to get to know them and to understand them, a goal to share cultures, ideas and experiences.

This is reflected in the language that is used. Students go live with a “family.” They have a host mom and dad, along with brothers and sisters. The Rotarians are extended family; adults who have taken the responsibility of preparing students from their district to go abroad and adults on the other end who have volunteered to care about the new young people in their lives.

Where else will these students go in life and find people who are so eager to meet them, so determined to make their year a good one? The message is: we are here to know you. We welcome you. You are on our center stage.

They are greeted by families who say “you are our daughter.” How powerful is that? What if we met all strangers with the premise of “you are our daughter, our son, our brother?” What if we greeted strangers from another country with hugs and kisses as they walked off the airplane and into our lives? The exchange program takes away the disinterest or suspicion involved in meeting someone new and begins with the idea that “we will get to know each other and we will love each other.”

What makes Rotary different than other exchange programs is the broad network. Students grow to love not only the people in their host family, but other students from all over the world. Imagine having a year of your life to meet other students who are sharing the experience of living in another country. They meet with an immediate common bond; a shared goal of getting to know each other. Again, the premise is “I want to know you and to love you. I want to have fun with you.” When else in life do people meet in this same way?

I heard stories about this from my daughter. Students from other countries told her they had thought they didn’t like Americans until they got to know her. In a bus with 20 other people from all over the world, stereotypes go out the window. Students share their histories and their stories; they share laughter, adventure and lack of sleep. They learn to know each other to the core. I witnessed this over and over this year with the Rotary Exchange Students in our district. One of the most heartbreaking and heart warming images was the final embrace of Zuhey from Costa Rica and Deer from Thailand. Two girls from totally different cultures who became the best of friends. Two girls who never would have met someone from the other side of the world if it were not for Rotary. When they met, they couldn’t even speak the same language. By the time they had to say goodbye, they were completing each others’ sentences.

The other thing no one told me:

A year ago, I grieved as I said goodbye to my daughter. I knew I was lucky to have Zuhey here, living in Jessica’s bedroom. I knew it would help me to have another girl to care about. What I didn’t totally anticipate was the grief at the other end. Now my daughter is home, and my heart is aching for Zuhey. She was not a “replacement” for Jessica. She was a wonderful, insightful and loving young woman who became our daughter.

How else would this ever have happened? Rotary sent us a gift. Rotary introduced us to a shy girl who spoke little English and said “this is your daughter.” We said goodbye to a confident young woman fluent in English. And she was – and will always be – our daughter.