

Dear District 5100 Rotarians,

**Let me tell you about a wild roller-coaster ride.** Our 2019 Outbound Candidates have survived a pretty rough couple of years. As these 45 members of the class of 2019 were being selected by their clubs **the roller-coaster ride inched forward.** In the 2019-20 school year they were trained, placed in chosen countries, studied a new language, and were applying for travel documents as **the roller-coaster ticked, ticked, ticked upward to the top.** They were nearly ready for their 2020-21 exchanges. Then the coronavirus pandemic hit. **Their roller coaster ride suddenly dropped toward the bottom** as their exchanges were suspended until January 2021. **Spirits fell, but this was just beginning.** As January approached, hopes for a renewed exchange rose, **the ride turned upward again.** Then the full 2021-22 school year was suspended and **the roller coaster plummeted.** Next, D5100 allowed these students to defer their exchanges to the 2021-22 school year. **The roller coaster rose and dipped and wound through a series of hard turns** as hope was renewed bit by bit until the March 19, 2021, Rotary International announcement that all exchanges were suspended until June 30 2022. **The ride plummeted to rock bottom** as many of our original 2019 students learned they will age out before the 2022-23 school year. **For them, the ride is over.** For others, a new ride might begin as they apply for the 2022-23 exchange year through their clubs. Uncertainty lingers for all.

Yet these students are remarkably upbeat and grateful for what Rotary District 5100 has given them. At the conclusion of the 2021 Eastern Oregon Discovery Excursion, I asked the students to write a paragraph about what all this means to them. These are their essays, sent to me over the following few days, BEFORE their 2021-22 exchanges were suspended. These are their words. They are enlightening and heartwarming. Enjoy!

*By Ella W., Rotary Club of White Salmon-Bingen, going to Belgium*

*Ever since I was in elementary school, I have dreamed of going abroad as a Youth Exchange Student. After I did some research, I realized that Rotary Youth Exchange would be the best option for me and my family. After getting selected by the White Salmon-Bingen Rotary Club my freshman year of high school, I was thrilled to begin this incredible adventure.*

*Less than two years later, I cannot begin to express how life-changing my experience has already been.*

*The first time I met other students was at the Country Fair in Salem. This is when all of the current inbounds make a booth about their country to persuade you to go there. This was also the first time I got to meet my class of outbounds. Although I was super nervous at first, I was quickly able to see how nice everyone was. A couple of weeks later, we got to go on the Eastern Oregon trip with about 80 students all together! I built friendships that I know will last a lifetime. The country officers and Rotexes I bonded with that week have acted as mentors to me; they have taught me how to be kind, courageous, and they inspire me to be just like them when I grow up.*

*Of course meeting my best friends and making unforgettable memories on the two trips was fun but the biggest difference that Rotary has made in my life is in my mental health. Coming home from my first Eastern Oregon trip, I was obviously sad to leave all of my friends, but it was the first time that I remembered being happy in a very long time. Such a long time, that I didn't even know that I was*

*unhappy. With this new found happiness I also learned how to live confidently and not care what other people think.*

*Rotary has changed my life for the better in so many ways that I cannot begin to express them all with words on a paper. All I know is how thankful I am for this insanely amazing experience. I really hope that next year I will be able to go abroad to Belgium, but even if I can't, Rotary has already given me more opportunities, inspiration, and love than I can ever repay them for.*

*By Wintana E., RC of Salem, going to Italy*

*Dear Dan,*

*Thank you so much for asking us to write down our journey with Rotary. It felt liberating to write out my thoughts that I have kept bundled for the past year.*

*Rotary To Me*

*The moment I stepped into the bustling room filled with curiosity, excitement, and unfamiliar faces, I knew I would never regret my journey wherever it would lead me. From the beginning, joining the Rotary Youth Interact club at my school to do community service, not only in our little city, but to help others in different countries, I never would have known it would lead me to the possibilities of exchange.*

*I learned many new things and met amazing people and eventually my club of Salem's counselor Christine, who invited me to apply for the program. It was my very first interview but with her support, I was able to take hold of this opportunity, and meet so many amazing people.*

*Although the past year has been difficult, from a cut exchange to re-applications that aren't guaranteed, I would do it all over again. Rotary to me is more than just an exchange program. It is a family I never knew I needed. A journey that taught me so much. From first interviews, to what it means to represent the best side of yourself. All while making lifelong friends and memories that will last forever, with or without an exchange.*

*Life doesn't always go as planned, I've definitely learned that lesson during this pandemic. I never got to step on the plane to start my journey. But in a way, I already started my journey with so many new friends and family, just with an unclear destination.*

*By Ches E., RC of Tualatin, going to Chile*

*For me, this year has been one of the hardest of my life. I was and am dedicated to the prospect of exchange. Every time I think of it, my day lightens. So to have so much uncertainty surrounding something that I have sacrificed so much for is incredibly difficult.*

*Spring/Summer: I worked hard to learn Spanish for my exchange in the beginning of the pandemic, but as it became clear that our exchanges weren't going to happen, the daily effort I put into my language began to weigh on me like a reminder of wasted time. I remember specifically one night where I broke down in tears angry at the entire world and myself for the circumstances that we had all been thrust into.*

*Fall/Winter: Without an exchange to motivate me and little community in covid isolation, I struggled to motivate myself in school, and every piece of information I heard from the committee regarding the future of our exchanges catalyzed my drive and motivation. My closest friends moved away early in the winter. This left me clinging to the idea of college or exchange. Those were some of the hardest months of my life so far.*

*This spring with the warmer weather and the yearly Rotary ski trip reminded me of the love and community that I have while I'm here and the future that I have, hopefully, abroad but also in the U.S. So far, throughout this year, I can say that I am incredibly grateful for my friends in Rotary and to have such kind passionate advocates in the youth exchange committee.*

*Thanks Dan- Ches*

*By Chloe G., RC of Tillamook, going to Finland*

*An exchange student is by definition a student who leaves their country of origin to study in another country while experiencing a new culture. However, over the past year, this definition has become outdated and the experiences leading up to now have brought me to question exactly what it means to be an exchange student. I thought I had been prepared for exchange last year; I had developed excitement for traveling, learning a new language and experiencing a new culture. Until the pandemic hit, and I was forced to say goodbye to my friends from Finland, Germany, France, and Belgium from a distance.*

*It wasn't until then that I realized the importance of friendships you make on exchange go beyond everything. Following their early leaving, I was deferred from my exchange 3 times after being placed in open countries. However I have proceeded to take in every opportunity that allows me to continue my study abroad through the Youth Exchange Program.*

*It has been an emotional year, but I have disciplined myself financially, continued studying a foreign language, and made connections because of Rotary. It has prepared me to live a life beyond my own comfort zone, and develop a sense of self.*

*I feel regardless of any future circumstances, that being a part of Youth Exchange has given me a broader perspective of the world. I am redefined as a person, and feel further prepared to go on exchange as I have found the true meaning of being an exchange student; to make connections that last a lifetime.*

*By Hope W., RC of Dallas, going to Denmark*

*Hello,*

*Over this past year, I have changed a lot mentally. Unfortunately, I didn't grow in height! But rather, I have matured quite a bit during this year of lockdown. I have realized how much I love seeing and interacting with people, especially my peers. In October I started working at a fast food restaurant in my town and that job has helped me see and interact with others in a safe and helpful environment. Through that job I have begun understanding what is needed from an adult in our society and it has motivated me even more to work as hard as possible to achieve the things I want to do. Although it has been difficult I am grateful for the things I have learned this year.*

*Thank you for giving me this opportunity to express how I have changed and explore the good that has come out of this past year,*

*Hope (Makayla) Wade.*

*By Luke V., RC of Seaside, going to Finland*

*Covid took the world by storm and provided me with challenges that I never thought I would never have. I was prepared for my exchange. I studied the language, I am in daily contact with my host family, I experienced the necessary training to prepare me for a year abroad. I felt that I had done everything correctly.*

*Covid had other plans.*

*For the safety of everyone involved, I was forced to defer my exchange. However, I am grateful that Covid arrived after I entered the Youth Exchange program. Without the training and the experience I had received from my host club and district 5100, I would have struggled with the difficult year that was yet to come. Youth Exchange has provided a view that many of my peers haven't seen. It has taught me to be confident, independent, bold, and pursue activities that interest me. Here are a few examples. Many of my local first responders did not have the proper equipment at the beginning of the pandemic. To help aid their supply shortage, I used a 3D printer and printed masks that had an N95 rated filter. I started my own licensed business doing custom metal work and I donate 10% of revenue to Rotary and The Oregon Fallen Badge Foundation. I was motivated to graduate early and apply to colleges.*

*Together, Rotary Youth Exchange and Covid have given me the tools to succeed in all aspects of my life. And although Covid-19 has caused my exchange to be delayed, I remain optimistic that my exchange will proceed.*

*By Sarah B., RC of Canby, going to Argentina*

*Hello,*

*I applied to the long term program of Rotary Youth Exchange during the summer of 2019. Since then, I have been to many orientations, meetings, and trips with other candidates and Rotary officers. During this time they have truly become some of my closest friends. We are such like-minded people and we immediately bonded.*

*All of our exchanges got postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and we were devastated. However, we all went through the same situation and were able to help each other along the way. I have a group of people who are the most amazing people and all share the same goal of next year (hopefully) being around the world on exchange. The community surrounding the program is amazing and I am so grateful to be a part of it.*

*Sarah*

Roughly a month after these paragraphs were written, the RI decision to suspend 2021-22 exchanges was made public. These students' dreams were suddenly interrupted and for some, **the roller-coaster ride has indeed ended**. All of them are strong, though. Some, like Ella, are young enough to stay the course and go to Belgium in 2022-23. For others, life plans are changing. Luke has already turned the page. He has enrolled in the honors program at Oregon State University next year. Most, like Chloe and Hope, are exploring other pathways; study-abroad programs in universities, maybe a job in Alaska, or an au pair position somewhere, anywhere. **As the roller-coaster ride eases into the exit area, our students climb off, but they aren't complaining. Instead, they talk of how wonderful the ride was – how they learned about themselves as they rolled up and down and through the hard curves.**

Rotarians, if one of these students, or any of the other exchange students, is in your club... Please reach out to them, ask what their plans are; offer to listen, offer suggestions that might interest them. Above all, please engage with them and make sure they know we care for them.

These bright, bright students are our future, and they want to be Rotarians.

Cheers to them,

Dan Boldt

Chair, District 5100 Youth Exchange Committee