

# Rotary Voices - Stories of service from around the world

## My Rotary Youth Exchange year in Canada (2014-2015)

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I spent a year in Canada as a Rotary Youth Exchange student, and I can't believe how fast the year went by. On my flight back to Brazil a few months ago, I reflected on the experience, and had so many thoughts.

I remembered arriving with anxiety, and yes, even a little fear. The experience is never entirely what you expect and you can never totally prepare for it. I think that few students go in with a full understanding of how intense and deep the experience will be, and how hard it can be to do something different from what you have been used to doing every day of your life.

But then there is the freedom. Being an exchange student gives you a chance to create a new life and become whatever you want to be. You learn to value what you have and take care of yourself on your own. Without the sheltering arms of your birth family around you, you have the freedom to spread your wings and grow a bit on your own, with the help of your host families.

It is not just a difference between cultures or countries, but it's the difference you face in each family, each religion, each social class, each person. It's to be hungry for information about the world and to never stop learning. It's to feel everything around you, full and intense, to learn a new language, to meet people from all over the world, to have one, two, three, or even four different families.

I gained a few kilograms. OK, more than a few kilograms. But who cares? I had the chance to look in the mirror and realize that a lot of things had changed, on the inside as well. I lost my shyness, and I look back confused because the old life doesn't fit anymore.

Exchange is a continuous process of absorption. I met people who inspired me, because of the way they think, or because of their words or their attitudes, or through the experiences they shared, or by the great friendship that I gained.

I learned also to say goodbye — which was much harder than I thought — but to still appreciate the barriers I had broken, the horizons I had reached, and the lessons I had learned. Every moment will be forever with me, in my memories and in my heart. And I will be forever thankful.

As the plane touched down in Brazil, I told myself, "Don't be sad because it's over; be happy because it happened."