

Being a foreign exchange student is so much more than traveling and getting to stay with a new family. There's a huge sense of responsibility and privilege. As a global citizen you are trying to be the most positive example you can be of your native country but at the same time you are trying to adapt respectfully and fit in. Setting foot on a new land is humbling. The whole world suddenly seems much larger.

Traveling with 4-H States International didn't hold any unpleasant surprises for me. I feel as if I've been reassured of what I hoped I knew was true about the world and the people in it. The world is and should continue to be open to exploring. I learned that the best exploration experience depends on hospitality and welcome. My backyard could be paradise to someone from a place I would call paradise. Having (or being) a host who is excited to help a guest enjoy their country makes a huge impact.

I think it's funny that society can't decide if everyone is the same or if everyone is different. I think I've learned that the answer is yes to both. We've been looking at the human race in such a black and white way (sometimes literally) that we've forgotten that culture is the palette of colors with which we paint ourselves. I'm not just a small town Michigan girl, I am a proud American that wears winged eyeliner and has opened my mind and heart to a spectrum of color in the world. I have met amazingly different not-so-different people with whom I bonded in celebration of our differences. I brought back some Norwegian culture in my mind and heart. I feel different. I have new and different ideas. I want to go back because I just wasn't done yet filling up on all there was available for me to absorb!

Getting ready to go to Norway was, surprisingly, a huge part of the total adventure. I found support from people I never would have gotten to know otherwise. I am so grateful for the generous gifts and scholarships people gave me. To earn the rest of the money I needed for the trip I had to find a steady, dependable job. I went into a salon one day to get a haircut and while I was there I mentioned my upcoming trip to Norway. Within a couple of weeks I was working as a Great Clips receptionist. I earned the money I needed to go to Norway and I will be starting cosmetology school soon thanks to the mentorship and encouragement of my coworkers. I never would have guessed how excited people in my community would be about learning I wanted to be an exchange delegate. I have had complete strangers overhear talk at the salon and ask me about my trip. I even had a spry elderly couple tell me about their several trips to Norway. That got me even more excited!

I became interested in Norway because I liked the sound of the language and I thought it would be a fun language to learn. When I researched Norway I was amazed by the landscape photos. Their Viking heritage and the Scandinavian design aesthetic appealed to me. What really interested me was the Norwegian's reputation as being the happiest or most satisfied culture in the world. The moment I discovered 4-H had an exchange program between the USA and Norway I knew I wanted to be a part of it.

Traveling to Norway exceeded all my expectations. I was able to be surrounded by the Norwegian language and the Norwegian landscape. Both were bigger and more complex than I expected. Daunting. Amazing. At times it was too much to take in and all I could do was step outside of myself for a moment and think “Wow, I’m in Norway.”

The Norwegians are excellent conservators of their history and their natural resources and are dedicated to their arts and occupations. They are rightfully proud of who they are and what they have. They take care to make their culture a positive experience for themselves as well as for visitors. They are a good example of a country that welcomes global citizens yet keeps a strong and positive national identity.

Since I’ve returned from Norway I’ve been able to give quite a few presentations about my trip. Every person and every group has seemed interested. I am almost always kept talking longer at meetings than I’ve been scheduled, plus I usually have a small group gather to ask me questions and hear me add details afterwards. It’s fun to talk about my experience and relive the details. It’s also satisfying to know that people are learning about Norway because of me. It makes me want to do more traveling and have more to share at home and abroad.

I appreciate the opportunity I had to travel to Norway through 4-H. Traveling as an exchange delegate made my world larger. As my perception of the world grew, I grew along with it. I want to thank everyone who helped me and I want to encourage everyone to consider what they can do as global citizens to support international exchanges.



