

International travel is something that changes you forever. I had the opportunity to go to Europe in high school and in college, and it is something I hope to do with my daughters when they are older. They are 13 years and 11 year old twins. When one of the 4-H Newsletters came out with an opportunity to host a student, I suggested it to the family. They all grumbled and thought it was crazy.

I pushed on. I called the State Coordinator, D'Ann Rohrer, and got to know more about the program. I knew it was something my family would love, so I asked D'Ann if we could do a call as a family and essentially repeat my entire conversation with her. She agreed, and it was incredible. The international students (from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) have never seen a squirrel before?! A garage sale would be mind-blowing. Our student would study so much, her parents will cater to her every need; we will need to teach her how to prepare a snack and to find food in the refrigerator when she's hungry. Living our daily life would be more than enough; we didn't have to do anything special. The students are all so gracious to be here and experience our culture. Throughout the entire call, my girls were nodding enthusiastically and whispering "YES!!". They were sold.

The application to host was very simple; basically, tell us about who is in your family and what do they like to do. We attached some photos. My husband had to become a registered 4-H Volunteer; As a club leader I was already a certified volunteer. We were notified we would be receiving a 14 year old girl named Seohyun -though she is 15 in Korean age. Her packet of information looked like our application with her interests and a couple of photos. An online orientation was required where cultural norms and suggestions to keep our student more comfortable were further explained beyond the packet they provided. We were surprised that many of the families hosting were not associated with 4-H! We played Jeopardy to learn more about 4-H for those unfamiliar; the final question was to write the 4-H pledge. If money was really involved, we would have rocked it!

We hosted our student for 1 month (July 19-August 17). There are opportunities to host a student year-round, too; but for our first time, a month was perfect. We picked up Seohyun at MSU's campus. The international students did a dance or play for the host families. We were all just fascinated and curious who our student was! There were about 29 Japanese students, 9 Korean students, and 1 Taiwanese student (in a trial year). We later learned our student recognized us immediately as we walked in, but she was shy, as her paperwork indicated, and we couldn't find her until they introduced us. Upon completion of the Matching Ceremony, we took our student to the MSU Children's Gardens and MSU Dairy Store for perhaps the world's largest waffle cone. Welcome to 'Merica!

Each week at our house we had an accidental theme. Week 1 was "getting to know us, American culture". She needed 2 days to adjust to our time change (13 hours behind her home time zone). Week 2 was attending a week-long 4-H camp at Camp Kidwell. My daughters were already registered for "Survivor", they jokingly called it, where they would live on a rustic island for the week; sure, let's take our Korean student who has never seen a squirrel into Michigan wilderness! We picked up the girls from camp and went to a wedding in Princeton, New Jersey. We saw the Statue of Liberty and Niagara Falls as we came home. Week 4 was fair week, then saying our goodbyes.

It was hard to predict what she would like. Overall, she found American food sweet, salty, and greasy. Though she loved a food that we found too salty and greasy, Spam (a Korean favorite since the Korean War). She loved Jambalaya and Sloppy Joes. We prepared a Thanksgiving meal to give her an idea of our holidays; she liked the turkey, and found the



pumpkin pie to taste like churros (she did not like cinnamon!). She loved our popcorn; they sweeten popcorn with sugar in Korea rather than salting it. She loved meat!

Seohyun did not like sports, but she walked a 5k with my daughters' cross country practice 3 days each week, trekked on our family adventures, and swam. She couldn't believe we drove to New Jersey; flights are around \$30 for her to go from her Korean island to the mainland. Her English grew from frequent one-word answers to excellent conversational English. Even on the drive to drop her off we learned she has to wear uniforms to school with her hair in a specific ponytail. Make-up, piercings, and hair dye are forbidden.

Gifting is a huge part of Korean tradition, so it was very important that we provided shopping time for her. Attending local festivals was a great way to expose her to our culture, but also homemade gifts for her to take home. A can opener was a completely foreign item to her; all of the cans are pull-tab. She took home 2 cans of Sloppy Joe sauce; I still need to ask her how they opened the cans! Though she taught us about authentic Korean Ramen noodles, we taught her about Americans' favorite Chicken Ramen and she gifted several packets. She couldn't believe how cheap they were here!

I'm frequently asked what my daughters got out of the experience. Some things are hard to measure, but I can tell you what has changed. All three are teaching themselves a language via books and the Duolingo app; 2 are learning Korean, and 1 is learning Japanese. Two daughters already have a strong interest in traveling internationally. They would all like another student next summer. Their friends still write their names in Korean on their cups when they come over, and several saved their cup Seohyun wrote on for them. The friends still play Gonggi, Korean jacks, whenever they find the game pieces. The "awkward" talking with others my teen says I do helped them meet "the coolest guy" they want to take an art class with -but also taught them about refugees, inspired them to learn more about current events and government, and taught them why engaging with others is beneficial. We all hope to visit her beautiful Jeju Island. They all consider Seohyun a sister.

Applications come out in January if you are interested in applying for a student.

-Michelle Richards, City Slickers 4-H Club Leader

Host Mom of International Exchange student

