

EAST HIGH SCHOOL

Many happy returns...sort of

By Susan Linck

East seniors Kelsey George, Emilia Olsen, Jordan Herman, Rachel Bowers-Sword and Serena Berkowitz made the world their oyster as they lived and studied abroad during the 2006-2006 school year. They are happy to be home in Madison...well, sort of. Returning home, they left behind their host families, school chums and other "exchangers" who had become like family. All five agree: coming home to Madison was bittersweet.

They lounge on chairs by the fireplace at Manna Café, which didn't exist when most of them left. They are passionate, animated, more worldly than when they left their homes and East High for adventures that could not be predicted. They are wrapped in the flags of their host country, signed by fellow exchangers, their new lifetime friends.

They argue over who really should have won the World Cup. They look me in the eye and say something I don't understand, then giggle, "Oh, that wasn't English, was it?"

Kelsey George lived in Charleroi, Belgium since August last year. Attending a traditional school and studying three languages kept her busy while making the adjustment to a new culture. She estimates it took her "a couple of months" to settle in. When asked about the biggest cultural difference, she remarks that "wine with dinner every night was nice" and adds that students don't drink to get drunk, even though they legally could.

Emilia Olsen went to Bolzano, Italy, so far in northeast Italy that her host mother spoke German. She took a cable car down the mountain daily to the town where she connected with public transportation to get to the art school she

attended for six months. "Settling in was difficult," she says. "It takes a long time to feel comfortable sleeping in someone else's room."

Rachel Bowers-Sword's most riveting memory upon arriving in Aguascalientes, Mexico, a city twice the size of metro-Madison was realizing, "I was in the middle of a desert! There was nothing, not a tree." Today, she would "give anything for a warm tortilla right off the griddle of a street vendor." And, she speaks warmly of her host family, revealing a true success story in matching family and student. "They just made me their own right from the first day," she says, smiling.

Jordan Herman has been home from her semester in Argentina longer than the others, but she is still bubbling from her experience and laughs about being "the blonde" in a culture where there are none. Her host mom was a teacher of English, wise enough to make Jordan speak the native tongue but compassionate enough to translate when needed. Her 5,000 kilometer bus voyage to Patagonia, the farthest southern reach of Argentina, is forever engraved in her brain.

Serena Berkowitz lived in Tabor, Czech Republic, the western part of what many remember as Czechoslovakia. She spent her first two weeks in an intensive language camp and continued lessons

during her stay. She misses her host family and "just being able to speak the language" to someone. She would be interested in finding someone to speak Czech with in Madison.

As a group, they were too busy absorbing their surroundings, negotiating their adopted countries and trying to study and do homework in a foreign language to be too terribly home sick. While they do recall at the beginning "really missing" Oreos, Pop Tarts, peanut butter, Mom, Dad, their little brother and their dog, every single one was in agreement. The thing they missed the most was the "sheer luxury of being able to drink the water out of the tap." Oh yes, and "enough water pressure to really steam up the bathroom without someone yelling at you."



Photo by Susan Linck

Left to right: Emilia Olsen, Jordan Herman, Kelsey George and Rachel Bowers-Sword (front) wrapped in their host country flags. Serena Berkowitz was unavailable for photo.

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