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New world view with exchange students

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Last summer my sister saw a newspaper ad seeking a host family for a Japanese exchange student for about six weeks. She agreed to host the girl, named Ayaka, who moved in with her, her husband and her 1-year-old. She was also expecting another baby at that time.

My sister enjoyed the experience so much that when Ayaka moved on to Seattle to study there for the school year, she decided to host a different Japanese girl, Yukiko, who was arriving here for the 2007-08 school year. She also persuaded a neighbor to also host a teenage girl from Japan. In the fall, my sister decided it would be nice to host a second exchange student to be company for Yukiko and the two reviewed applications for teenage girls coming to the United States for the second semester of the school year. They decided on a girl named Christina from Germany, who arrived about a month ago.

Since my sister became so familiar with the process of placing exchange students, she was asked if she'd be interested in working as a local coordinator by assisting in placing students arriving from other countries and helping American students wishing to study in other countries. I thought I'd include this information for anyone in the area who would be interested in hosting a student in their home or who has a child considering studying overseas.

The agency that she works with is Academic Year in America, www.academicyear.org. It works with students coming to the United States from several different countries and works with potential host families willing to take a student into their home for either a semester (five months) or a full school year (10 months.)

Host families are able to choose the gender and nationality of the student and some home countries include Albania, France, Macedonia, Tajikistan, Argentina, Germany, Malaysia, Thailand, Armenia, Hong Kong, Moldova, Turkey, Austria, Hungary, Mongolia, India, Philippines, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Poland, Ukraine, Brazil, Japan, Venezuela, Bulgaria, Italy, Romania, Vietnam, China, Japan, Russia, Chile, Columbia, Korea, South Africa, Ecuador, Kyrgyzstan, Spain, Egypt, Luxembourg, Switzerland.

You can also select the age of the student between 15 and 18 1/2, which works well if you have a teenage child and would like them to be in the same grade. My sister said that some host families seek out students with the same interests as their children, such as sports or dancing. The program is not open only to families with teenagers. Younger couples and senior couples can also host a student.

Students come with their own insurance and spending money. Host families are required to provide meals and a bedroom, which can be shared with a host sibling of the same gender within four years of age.

I'm always interested in learning about other cultures and this seems to be a great opportunity for both sides to learn a lot. During my freshman year of high school I recall having exchange students from Sweden, Germany and Russian in some classes and I thought it was fascinating.

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The opinions are solely those of the writer. Carrie Steinweg can be reached at csteinw@yahoo.com.

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