

Carroll Yesteryears

10 October 2021

Relationships that Spanned the Globed Built by AFS Program

By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Friendships that last for more than 40 years across the great oceans of the world are rare, but several Carroll County families who hosted exchange students at Westminster High School long ago still enjoy those ties. Thanks to email, FaceTime, and the ease of international travel, the host families and the students who lived with them haven't lost touch.

From the mid-1970s through the mid-1990s, a large group of parents whose children attended Westminster High School belonged to the adult chapter of the American Field Service (AFS) International/Intercultural Exchange Program. AFS, founded after WWII, continues to be dedicated to better understanding among people including awareness of mankind's common humanity, its diverse cultures around the world, and a concern for global issues. To further these goals, the AFS exchange experience develops relationships between American families and maturing young people from across the globe. The program is two-fold: hosting students from foreign countries who live in the U.S. for a school year and sending American students abroad for a summer or a year.

Members of the adult chapter at Westminster High not only supported their own exchange students but also those with other programs lacking local support. With a budget of about \$2,000 per year, the group organized welcome, holiday, and farewell parties for the students and their host families and helped pay student expenses such as prom attire or graduation caps and gowns. It also offered scholarships for local WHS students wanting to go abroad. The school had its own AFS chapter just for students. Over the roughly twenty years of its existence the adult chapter sent students or played host to students from more than 35 different countries. Almost every part of the world was represented: New Zealand and Australia, most South and Central American countries, nearly every European country, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, South Africa, Jordan, even Greenland!

Host families were carefully chosen for compatibility with a student's personality, and every family also had a liaison family. Because the students came from a wide range of countries, often with very different cultures, the initial weeks were sometimes stressful for everyone. A few students arrived scarcely able to communicate in English and spent many hours watching television to improve their skills. On the opposite end of the scale, one student, whose primary language was Russian, could quote Shakespeare in English. Some host parents remember how excited their students were when they had their first dream in English. They came to breakfast knowing a huge, unseen barrier was finally crossed. Host families encouraged a student's academic work as well as participation in extracurricular activities and frequently took them on family trips to see other parts of the U.S.

Many exchange students made great contributions to WHS during their stay, especially in sports such as soccer or field hockey. They might join the Ski Club if they came from Switzerland, Sweden, or Norway. One student from New Zealand found a rugby club nearby that he could

join. Football games with dances afterwards plus school clubs were activities not always offered at schools back home. Lack of public transportation in Carroll County sometimes proved to be a drawback, so host parents or host brothers and sisters were called upon to do extra driving, but as exchange students made friends, the problems decreased.

Once students felt comfortable speaking in English, many shared their stories with service clubs like Kiwanis and Lions or spoke to children in elementary schools. For all that their host families offered them, they gave back in many ways. Having exchange students in classes, on sports teams or just walking the halls at school brought a sense of the world that lay beyond Carroll County. That awareness was reflected in the number of WHS students who took advantage of the AFS Americans Abroad program to spend a summer or a full year in places like Indonesia, Italy, Venezuela, Belgium, and Turkey.

Each exchange student, whether they came from abroad or had gone overseas, was asked to host a special “Foreign Country Night” where they shared information about their homeland or their experience abroad. These were some of the highlights of the AFS year. They included the challenge of serving food similar to what might be eaten in Greenland, Ecuador, or Greece to a roomful of American guests or describing misunderstood cultural differences of all sorts. Luckily most students brought slides or pictures, special clothing, music, maps – anything to enlighten listeners.

Fund-raising was another big part of the chapter’s activities – candy and sub sandwich sales, progressive dinners, or “fun runs.” Sales of subs involved lots of adults and young people making and delivering hundreds of sandwiches assembled in a local church kitchen. When it was over, everyone smelled like an Italian deli! Exchange students always participated. One year the AFS treasury was fueled by selling beer and hotdogs at an Orioles game at Memorial Stadium. Arriving early, the students watched the Orioles warm up from behind home plate and went home with tales about America’s favorite pastime played at a huge ballpark. Those were the years when Cal Ripken and the Orioles were at the top of their game.

When school ended, the adult chapter occasionally hosted a bus trip of 30-40 students from another part of the country who were heading home. If they had spent their year living in the Midwest, Alaska, or on the West Coast, a short stop in Westminster offered a chance to visit Washington, see the White House, the Capitol, Washington Monument, and other sights on a bus the chapter rented. That stay ended with one final gathering, often with the singing of John Denver’s “Leaving on a Jet Plane,” which became almost an anthem at AFS farewells. Many AFS host families recall that saying goodbye to their students was one of the hardest things they ever had to do.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*



*Jorgen Compas, top, of The Netherlands, Titti Nilsson of Sweden, and Sayuri Yamamoto of Japan were AFS exchange students attending Westminster High School in 1981-82. Courtesy photo.*



*The Adult Chapter of the American Field Service exchange student program at Westminster High School kept a huge banner decorated with flags representing the countries of its foreign students. Courtesy photo.*