

Close to Home: Exchange programs threatened by potential budget cuts

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CHRISTOPHER GULLIXSON IS AN 18-YEAR-OLD SANTA ROSAN WHO HAS SPENT THE PAST YEAR IN SWEDEN AS PART OF ROTARY YOUTH EXCHANGE. | July 16, 2017

"We turned and sailed away ... feeling that whatever the future might have in store, the treasures we had gained would enrich our lives forever."

— John Muir

One recent Friday, when I normally would have been getting ready for high school final exams, I was getting a different kind of education. I was hiking through the woods in Nässjö in southern Sweden with an Australian, a Swiss and two other Americans. We had decided to spend a break from school to go exploring. During the weekend, we were joined by other students from Australia, Sweden, Thailand, Brazil, New Zealand, Mexico and Canada and spent our time sharing stories of our experiences abroad.

We are all exchange students through the Rotary Youth Exchange, a program that offers students between the ages of 15 to 18½ a chance to spend up to a year abroad, going to school and experiencing life in a foreign land. Seventy percent of American high school students who study abroad do so through Rotary Youth Exchange. I wish that every student could have these opportunities, but experiences like this may now be in danger.

Under the president's proposed budget, the U.S. State Department is facing deep cuts. For example, the department's educational and cultural exchange programs, which include the well-known Fulbright program, are facing a reduction of more than 50 percent. In addition, the high school exchange visitor program (J-1 visa), which is overseen and managed by the State Department, is at risk of being dramatically reduced or eliminated. While students like me benefit from the hospitality of host families in foreign countries, the program, which is funded by Rotary clubs, districts and students, works because parents in the United States agree to host students from other countries in return. Students from overseas come to the United States under the J-1 visa authorization, and if that goes away, the whole program could be in jeopardy.

This is part of my greater concern that President Donald Trump's "America first" policies and talk are having a negative impact on America's relations around the world. I know I have been experiencing this here in Sweden where I have been peppered with questions about our new president. Recent stories also suggest that his anti-immigrant policies are discouraging international students from coming to the United States for college.

We are essentially building a wall around our country that will not only block out other people and cultures but keep the knowledge curve of other cultures stagnant within our own. The ideas and opinions that circulate within that wall won't have the opportunity to be challenged or changed. The less people know about other cultures, the more problems our world will have. The job of any student who decides to study abroad is that of an ambassador who tries to improve relations. This is needed now more than ever.

Granted, this particular program is not for everyone, and it was not an easy decision for me. I decided to postpone my senior year at Maria Carrillo High School to spend a year in a country where I did not know the language, the customs

and, most of all, the people. I've since learned all of those things — and learned much about myself in the process.

I can't begin to share all of the experiences I have had. I've gone skiing, ice fishing, dog-sled racing and diving for oysters. I've worked on a tall-mast ship, toured glass factories, fed reindeer and gone backpacking and camping in some of the most picturesque woods in the world. And on one March evening, when I normally would be at home eating dinner and finishing up homework in Santa Rosa, I was sitting on the roof of a hostel above the Arctic Circle watching the northern lights wave across the sky. These ribbons of green were so beautiful it brought tears to my eyes.

But some of my fondest memories so far have been just the conversations I have had with people from all over the world.

I just hope other students will continue to have this same opportunity and that the United States doesn't close this window to the world.

As John Muir noted in his quote above following his adventures in Glacier Bay, Alaska, these experiences are treasures that once acquired can't be taken away. But they can be blocked from ever occurring. Let's not let that happen.

Christopher Gullixson, son of Editorial Director Paul Gullixson, is an 18-year-old Santa Rosa resident who has spent the past year in Sweden as part of Rotary Youth Exchange. For more information about the Rotary program go to www.rotary.org.

