

Chicago area exchange students enrich their host families and the city



The Lee's children Tyler, Cami, Connor and Hayden with Gustavo second from right



From left, Gustavo, Traci Lee and daughter Cami Lee at a Train concert. Photo by Traci Lee

BY MIRA TEMKIN

What's it like to host an exchange student from another country and have them live with you and your family for a year? "It's a very rewarding experience," said Traci Lee. "They live with you, go to school, share your family's traditions and become immersed in American culture." Traci and Bill Lee have hosted exchange students from American Field Service (AFS-USA) for five years. "Every year is different because each student is different," commented Traci.

Last summer, high school junior Gustavo from Maringa in Parana, Brazil began living with the Lees while attending Niles West High School in Skokie. During his exchange year, Gustavo played soccer, participated in theater and auto club and learned more about life in America.

Gustavo's first reaction when he arrived at O'Hare was shock at the number of new cars on the road, something he wasn't used to seeing. In addition to the many cultural differences between the United States and his native Brazil, Gus was surprised at how hard people worked to support their families. "He saw there was a not a time to relax," said Traci. "And that was very different from Brazil where people were able to spend more time with their families."

At Niles North, Gus was thrilled to see all of the extra-curricular activities that were available for students. "If he wanted to play soccer at home, it was through private organizations," said Traci. "Gus was also surprised at how competitive high school was and he had to work diligently to do well. He wasn't used to having so much homework." Chipotle burritos and Buffalo wings became Gus' favorite foods.

Traci, who works for American Field Service (AFS) as a Team Development Specialist says that last year the organization placed around 75 students in the Chicago



Exchange students volunteer at the Greater Chicago Food Depository and clean up the 12th Street Beach in Chicago. Photo by Traci Lee

area. The exchange students must meet stringent criteria to be accepted into the program, based on grades, income level and an interest in math, engineering or technology. AFS also sponsors activities through the year for all of the students in the area such as Halloween and Christmas parties, a scavenger hunt in downtown Chicago and other social gatherings to engage the group and foster camaraderie.

Another important aspect of the program is two National Days of Service in which Chicago area exchange students "give back" to the community. In November, the students volunteer at the Greater Chicago Food Depository and in April, they clean up the 12th Street Beach in Chicago, Traci says, "For many of the students, this is their first time volunteering. Where they come from, a culture of service doesn't exist. AFS feels it's important for them to have the experience of giving back."

Traci observed that the Brazilian students were much closer to each other than the students from Germany or Italy who seemed to

want to spend time with their new American friends instead of their compatriots. "The Brazilians all wanted to hang out together and we had to encourage Gus that one of his objectives in coming here was to improve his English and make new friends," added Traci Lee.

"Gus was a very sweet boy and extremely helpful around the house. He was very eager to please and enjoyed playing outside with my son. When it was time to go, he left loaded down with abundant luggage, memories and a place in the heart of our family," Traci said.

Gus truly enjoyed his experience here and would love to return for college. But, as Traci explained, "In Brazil, the local university is free and parents don't anticipate having that expense."

Does Traci Lee's have any advice for other U.S. families who want to host exchange students? "Be open to the cultural differences" and "Be honest about the rules of your house and communicate your expectations. Don't let small issues turn into bigger



Gustavo enjoys the sights of Chicago with unidentified friends from the American Field Service. Photo by Traci Lee

ones," is her best advice. "But be prepared for a wonderful, life changing experience."

Linda Mellis, co-chair for the Chicago Area chapter of AFS and an active 15 year AFS volunteer, agrees. "The entire family learns about the customs of another country. Through social gatherings, the family meets other like-minded families and makes lifelong friends, while family member learn what it means to be a global citizen of the world. In addition, the long-term joys of staying in touch often include visiting the student and meeting their family in their home country."

As the new school year approaches, the Lee family will again host a student-- this time a boy from Hungary. When asked what her family gets out of this experience, she replied, "We really love adding on a new family member."

AFS has been exchanging students from 40 countries for more than 65 years and is currently looking to expand placements in the Chicago area. To find out more about American Field Service and become a host family visit www.afsusa.org/hostfamily.

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