

My exchange year 2019/2020

a report written by Martin Friedrich

I am writing this on the plane that is taking me back home to Germany. I have just revisited and relived all the incredible memories I made during the last 10 months by scrolling through the photo gallery on my phone. There were a couple things that made this exchange year different from all the others in the years before. I'm sure everybody who reads this remembers the global Pandemic due to a virus called "COVID-19". All I want to say about this is that it doesn't matter what is going on in the world, you can always rely on the people you are with. It doesn't matter where you are in the world. You could be in Berlin, New York, Munich, Los Angeles, or Alexandria in Indiana. The latter is where I spent the last 10 months. You most definitely have never heard of "small town USA." I wouldn't have heard of it either if it wasn't for my GAPP exchanges. But trust me if I say that it doesn't matter where you are as long as you have the right people around you.

I got to spend my time with the best people anybody could've ever wished for. Starting off with my host family: The Beltz's. Who, pretty spontaneously, decided to let me live with them for this exchange year. I grew up as an only child and suddenly had to share a bed- and bathroom with my host brother Chase. This might sound a little scary to some people while it's completely normal to others. But for me it was a new experience. All together a really good one. I can count the nights, where I wanted to sleep while my host brother was still wide-awake working on homework or playing games with his friends, with one hand. Compared to the amount of time I spent there in total, I think we can all agree that this is not a big amount of bad experiences. These won't be the only bad experiences you will have. It's just realistic to say that not every day will be perfect. And this is where I want to bring up another very important part of this exchange, Friends. I know a lot of people are scared to step out of their comfort zone and talk to new people. That's why my advice is to be open-minded and just say "yes" to all the opportunities that are given to you. This might be just as simple as a trip to the grocery store or in my case it was playing tennis for my school. I've been playing tennis for almost 9 years of my life and this year was by far the best season of my entire life. It doesn't matter what sport you play or what after school activity you do, you will always experience a certain spirit. The pride to be part of something that is bigger than you. Whether it's your sports team, the band, or the entire school. Everyone has spirit and is proud of what they have achieved in the past and can still achieve in the future, together as a group. This spirit is something that I have never felt in Germany before and one of the things that I will miss the most.

I have to say one more thing about "accepting opportunities and being open-minded." This is the most important one to me. Always keep in mind that small things can "snowball" and end up changing your entire life.

In my case it was a tennis match. Not just any tennis match but the most competitive and important one of the entire season. Sectionals. This is a "tournament" where almost all the schools in the state compete. Sectionals, Regionals, Semi-state, and if your team is good enough to win all the mentioned tournaments, a state championship.

This was by far the best tennis match I have ever played. It went on for over 3 hours and after 30+ defended Match balls my doubles partner and I lost the game to a different school. Of course, I was sad because this also meant the end of tennis season. But as I said: the smallest or worst things can turn into the best and change everything.

A week after I lost the match one of my friends invited me to go and watch the regional finals, where I would also see the people I played in the match. They already knew each other and my friend introduced me to them. Obviously, it was weird to talk to them at first and I was a little insecure on how this would turn out. But they were really nice and interesting people. Long story short: I made new friends that day and after hanging out a couple times they introduced me to their friends and I ended up having a whole friend group at a different school just because I decided to play tennis and go to watch other people play. We spent A LOT of time together and there is not a single bad memory that we made.

So, if I was asked to sum this exchange year up and give advice to people that are thinking about using this incredible opportunity, I would say, that if you are willing to get used to minor differences and step out of your comfort zone this is definitely the right thing to do. Not only will it change you as a person and teach you many things about life in general, it will also give you lots and lots of experiences that you can get nowhere else. If you do decide to take this opportunity. I personally cannot point out enough how important it is to:

1. Take every single opportunity that is given to you, because it might just be the one that changes your life.
2. Surround yourself with people you love. Friends and family, and spend as much time with them as you can.

I hope you enjoyed reading my journal as much as I did writing it. I also wanted to thank the Alexandria Monroe High school and the F. F. Runge Gymnasium as well as the Goethe Institute for making this unbelievable experience possible. Now I'm going to go back to watching the sunrise and enjoy the last hour of my flight before I get to reunite with one of my, now two, families.