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MY EXCHANGE-STUDENT YEAR ON THE COAST



German student chronicles her stay

By **LIA WILLENBROCK**
 For *The Daily Astorian*

ROSEBURG, Wash. — It all started about two years ago. I was coming home from school and my parents asked me if I still wanted to go to America as an exchange student.

I had been interested in that since I was a little girl. My main reason was always to get to know the country I was born in. You see, both my parents are German citizens, but I was born in California while my dad was working in the United States. We moved back to Germany when I was very young.

So, of course, I was very happy for the opportunity to go to the United States. Back then we didn't know about the difficulties that would wait for us along the way.

We thought that my U.S. citizenship would make things a lot easier. In the end, it was the biggest issue. We contacted several exchange programs, but they refused to take me because of my dual citizenship.

After we figured that out, we looked for a family that could take me as a private exchange. Because my parents lived and worked in the United States for four years, they hoped they might be able to place me in a friends. But none were able to host.

One day, my dad contacted a former classmate, Ed Hunt, whom he remembered from his student exchange in the little town of Lyle, Washington, 30 years ago.

My dad asked him through Facebook if he would know a family that could take me as an exchange student for a year. Ed replied, that his family would be happy to take me. Pretty soon there was a Skype meeting. It was the first time that I saw my future host family. To my mom's surprise the family Hunt was still willing to take me, and Ed's oldest daughter even offered to share her room. We Skyped several times before I traveled to the U.S. My family took this as an opportunity to visit the states again. We did a wonderful tour across the country until they dropped me off in Washington State.

At the fair

It was a warm summer day when I arrived at the Wahkiakum County Fair to meet the Hunts for the first time.

Naturally I was very nervous at the beginning. But Lindsay and Grace, Ed and Amy Hunt's two daughters, just integrated me right away. I got to lead cows around at the fair — until that day I didn't even know that was possible. I had, overall, a couple great days at the fair with my host family. I also met Grandma and Grandpa Nelson: During those days I would spend a lot of weekends over at their house.



Photos by Ed Hunt/For The Daily Astorian

When I imagined a village, I imagined a small group of houses in one place. That is what German villages look like. Villages in the U.S. instead can be a lot more spread out. So I was really surprised when I saw the house of my host family. It was a beautiful blue house in the valley. The part that surprised me was that they were no houses around it.

I figured out the advantage of the big fields that surrounded the house when I first went on a horse ride. There's no better feeling than to lay on a horse's back in the field and look into the blue sky.

And then the rain

Soon cross country at Naselle started and with it came the rain. It seemed like it would never stop raining again. Even though Lindsay warned me about the weather in their area, I couldn't imagine it would be that bad. I wasn't use to having sport seasons, because, my entire life, I did sports all-year around. I thought it was great, so I could try a big variety of sports.

Cross country began before school, so when school started, I knew a couple of people. Every week, my host family would go to the football game at school. It was great. There were so many people supporting the team, and after a while I even understood the rules.

School systems

The American school system is a lot different than the German school system. What I liked a lot about the American school system, was that you have the same classes every day. That makes it easy to remember the people and the classrooms you need. I quickly found friends and a table at school lunches. I thought it was so great that there was freshly cooked breakfasts and lunches at school.

As the days got shorter, Halloween grew closer and closer. Trick or treating was one of my personal highlights of that holiday, and, of course, the spirit week in school. The hallway decorations amazed me. It was so fun to set the whole thing up.

When I'm already talking about holidays, I want to mention Thanksgiving, as well. It is another U.S.-specific holiday that I didn't know from home. We had Thanksgiving dinner over at Grandma's house. She prepared all the amazing food that is traditional to the holiday. The whole family got together and that was so nice.

The fall started to slowly turn into winter. Basketball season had begun. I'd never played basketball before, but

Let's look at differences in US-German experiences

Sports, location a part of deal

The Daily Astorian

ROSEBURG, Wash. — In Germany, Lia and her classmates only attend school until 1 p.m. Differences between Germany and life in Rosburg, Most days of the week, most kids are home by lunchtime. Her brother, Jonah, attends a school that includes classes on Saturdays.

- To get to school, kids ride the regular transit buses and walk. These buses can sometimes be pretty crowded. She liked American school buses because she was able to have a seat every day and the bus stopped at the end of the driveway.

- Sports are not part of the school. Lia and her brothers back home are involved in karate, tennis and football (soccer). Lia was a regional champion in karate before coming to the U.S.

- The distance between villages is much farther in the United States and the villages are structured differently.

- Cars are bigger and so are the parking spots.

- The package sizes of groceries are much bigger.

- School vacations are more frequent, but the summer vacation is shorter.

- The Christmas tree doesn't go up until Christmas eve and presents are opened on the 24th in the part of Germany where Lia lives. Presents come from an angelic figure known as Christkind, not Santa Claus. The Hunts tend to get their tree right after Thanksgiving and keep it until New Year's Day.

- Lia's student exchange to the United States was 30 years after her father's student exchange in another small Washington state town — Lyle, Wash., in 1986.

Like her father, Lia earned her driver's license in Washington state. She'll be eligible to drive in Germany when she turns 18.

See *EXCHANGE*, Page 2C