Welcome to the inaugural issue of Future Leaders EXpress!

This newsletter will feature FLEX in action before, during and after the exchange and will be shared with the large FLEX community – students, placement organizations, the program funder the U.S. Department of State, members of Congress, and many more. We hope you learn something new about FLEX in these pages, and we welcome your submissions for future issues. Please send your ideas or suggestions to:

cfitzgerald@americancouncils.org
Welcoming the 20th Class of FLEX

August, 2012

Approximately 800 FLEX students arrived at Dulles International Airport to spend a short night nearby before traveling on to the various cities where they will spend their exchange year. Many of the 2012-2013 FLEX class expressed feelings of excitement and uncertainty in the same breath, eager to meet their new families in this unfamiliar culture and wondering what they would find.

First Lessons

Students experienced the first splashes of their cultural immersion at the Holiday Inn near Dulles where they ate their first American pizza, slept in American beds (with labels on the pillows to mark “soft” and “hard”), and learned the morning departure procedures - including how to make it through U.S. airport security. At the airport they learned new English terms such as “layover” and “single-file line,” and some discovered first-hand that sometimes air travel in the U.S. is unpredictable.

Did you say it?

American Councils airport and hotel staff hear some “culture shock” phrases over and over. The following are some of our favorites:

“The roads here are so smooth.”
(Boys) “The soap in the bathroom is PINK!”
“This is an American experience...”

“Everyone smiles here and is so nice.”
“Is toothpaste a liquid?”
“Why is it so cold inside the buildings here? We’re all going to be sick!”

“I thought that in US things like these never happen, that everything is well organized.”
[In response to flight delays/cancellations]
July 6-Aug 6, 2012, Chisnau, Moldova

Every year since 2005, approximately 20 FLEX students have participated in American Councils’ four-week long English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Program in Chisinau, Moldova. The EFL Program is for students who can benefit from additional, pre-program English instruction. This year FLEX students from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan took part in the Program.

The EFL Program includes English instruction in conversation, grammar and writing from professional EFL teachers and the same pre-departure orientation sessions taught by American Councils staff and alumni that all FLEX students attend before traveling to the U.S. In addition students take part in cultural activities such as celebrating U.S. Independence Day and joining art and drama clubs.

“EFL is more than just a language course.”
-Alexandr Hriptun, EFL Program Coordinator, Moldova

Participants made great strides in improving their English skills based on testing conducted on the first and last days of the Program, but the EFL Program’s success cannot be measured in these terms alone. Over the course of the month, participants become more independent, mature, and adept at problem-solving. They forged new friendships with each other, challenged stereotypes, and created memories that will last a lifetime.

We congratulate the EFL Program Class of 2012!

From Neighbors to Friends: Alik and Kenan

One of the new friendships forged at the Moldova EFL continued in the U.S. as Kenan and Alik were both placed in North Carolina. Having already gotten to know one another in Moldova, the boys were happy to be “reunited” and are enjoying getting to know their host family. Kenan, who is visually impaired, has been a great help cooking and cleaning around the house with Alik, who occasionally lends Kenan a helping hand - but it was Kenan who won a recent family bowling match!

Alik says: “As Thomas Jefferson said, ‘Peace and friendship with all mankind is our wisest policy, and I wish we may be permitted to pursue it.’ We do not have to have or live in war to value the prize of peace. For me, peace is one of the most important things in human life...We create problems for ourselves, our countries, when we abuse power. It makes us kill, lose, [and] hate everything that we need and love. Using our power [for] war, we lose our chance to live the life that we want: [a] life of peace and unity. War hurts everybody, no matter who [wins or loses]. Even winners lose more than they [gain]. They lose human life, which is more important than anything in the world.”

Kenan says: “‘Imagine all the people, living life in peace’ - John Lennon. I am from Azerbaijan - the country that is hostile with Armenia, [its] neighboring country, for political and historical reasons. The bounds and relations between these countries [prohibit] entry. There was a war between these two countries in [the] early 1990s [over] land. Many people died during the war. Although the war [has] ended, both countries are still hostile, and it is a half-coar situation [on the] borders of these countries. The hostility between these two countries [is] pointless. It has caused a lot of people to lose their lives... [and] many other miserable situations. For example, many cities have been destroyed, leaving many people without homes who are now refugees.”
Eugene, Oregon

This past August, Mobility International USA (MIUSA) hosted high school exchange students with disabilities from around the world, including 13 FLEX students. One of the highlights of their weeklong visit was a morning spent volunteering in Grassroots Garden.

In the garden, which grows food for the hungry in Lane County, Oregon, students learned through their senses, about their new host country. Blind students explored the gardens through taste and touch. Students with mobility disabilities made applesauce or picked squash and zucchini. Everyone contributed, regardless of disability.

During their week in Oregon, the students rode adaptive bikes, took part in an outdoor challenge course and visited an American high school. They also learned about American disability laws and rights and met with mentors. According to Tatyana, a deaf FLEX student from Russia, “Disabled people can do a lot of things. [They] just need accommodations, not special treatment.” MIUSA’s workshops taught her about accommodations available in the United States that students may use to succeed in school. “I might use captions, a note-taker or sign language interpreter,” she says.

MIUSA’s program focuses on preparing FLEX students with disabilities for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead during their year in the United States. “I feel more confident because MIUSA taught us how the year in the U.S. will be,” said Veaceslav, a FLEX student from Moldova. As they gained confidence, Veaceslav, Tatyana, and the other students with disabilities found common ground with each other, not just in the garden, but in a new country.

Contributing Author: Franz Knupfer
Anastasiya is exceeding her host family and local coordinator’s expectations in the area of volunteerism. One of her first assignments at school was to sell cheesecakes and pizzas as a fundraiser for choir. Anastasiya went above and beyond what was expected of her by going door-to-door night after night selling over 80 items. As a result, she will receive recognition from the arts department at school along with a small prize. But the biggest reward in her eyes is meeting the people in her community she never would have met if she hadn’t knocked on their door to fundraise. Now she looks forward to delivering the items so she can see her new friends again. Many of these people are older and very excited to meet this young ambassador.

Anastasiya’s volunteering doesn’t stop there. She is always ready to volunteer at the local church she attends with her host family, and she is working with another church in her community on its upcoming mission trip. She is especially excited because they will be working with an orphanage in her home country. She also volunteers at the local food pantry by giving out food to those in need, and is applying to be a volunteer at the local nursing home this fall and winter when her school golf team commitment is over.

Her latest volunteer effort is with Loving Hugs, Inc (www.lovinghugs.org). This organization, working in over 40 countries from Afghanistan to Zambia, has helped children living in poverty or in war-torn countries by giving them “huggable” stuffed toys. She is working with two other exchange students in her community going door-to-door (again) asking people to donate new or gently loved teddy bears and plush toys to send to Loving Hugs. She and an exchange student from Nigeria will be speaking in local churches and on the radio to promote the effort. Anastasia’s goal is to complete over 100 hours of community service by the end of the school year. Anastasiya is a great example of a scholarship recipient impacting her U.S. community and the touching the world.

Contributor: Deb Bowen, Local Coordinator

Community Service at a Glance

One placement organization calculated that during the 2011-2012 school year, 109 students from four different exchange programs, including 29 FLEX participants, completed 7,273 hours of service. That’s one hour of service for every hour, on average, the students were in the U.S.!
June 12-14, 2012, Washington, DC.

The FLEX program began in 1992, with the first group of students coming on program in August 1993 and returning home in 1994. We began celebrating the twentieth anniversary in 2012 with a year-end event that brought nearly 200 FLEX students to the seat of the American government to share their experiences and ambitions with enthusiastic listeners.

The celebration centered around a reception held in the U.S. Capitol rotunda with invited guests including host families, diplomats, U.S. Department of State representatives, politicians, and FLEX administrators. The students received words of encouragement from distinguished guests including Ambassador J. Adam Ereli, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs; Dr. Dan Davidson, President of American Councils for International Education; and Steven Culbertson, President and CEO of Youth Service America. FLEX students represented the countries of Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine.

The students also had the chance to interact with Department of State representatives, who after initial introductions reversed the traditional briefing format by directing questions to the students themselves. It was a unique exchange of information from participant to funder that gave a brief but real insight into students’ impressions of their year in the U.S.

The twentieth anniversary celebration will continue in 2013 with another culminating year-end event. Stay tuned for more information, coming to students in December along with return travel information.

Three FLEX students shared inspiring remarks at the reception about their experiences in the U.S., including Olena of Ukraine, who said:

“Cliché as it may sound, [the] FLEX program changed my life. Not only that I got to be in a cross-cultural environment, gained some crucial social and professional skills and simply broadened my outlook, but I have discovered something that I never believed in: exclusively American, the concept of everything being possible. The idea of being politically active [had] not even been considered by older generations and my parents, just because we are an ethnic minority in Ukraine.

“I remember my coordinator telling me ‘think as big as you can.’”

Here in the U.S. it has proven to be different. In America people get involved in their community as citizens, and achieve things no matter what their ethnic background is. Watching it gave me a big inspiration. In the U.S. I discovered my burning passion for social change and making a difference. For the first time in my life my ideas were heard. As I was planning an event for the International Education Week, I was still a little hesitant. But I remember my coordinator telling me “think as big as you can,” which has ultimately become the motto of my life. Becoming socially active and involved through International Education Week, Global Youth Service Day, volunteering and doing community service has shown me the importance of social initiative. After my FLEX year I want to encourage my generation to get involved, raise your voice, and think as big as you can.”
Although FLEX 2012-13 participants have only recently arrived at the U.S., it is never too soon to mention The Bradley Herald, the newsletter of the 21,000 strong FLEX alumni community! Check the newsletter frequently to read about the amazing things alumni are doing in their home countries and to learn about the opportunities available to alumni when they return home:

http://www.bradleyherald.com/

Here is a sample of what you will find on the site:

**Host Dad Visits Russia after 18 years**

“For Dmitry, now the host and a father of four, his host dad’s visit gave him some new insights into his own FLEX year and the lessons he took home after a year as a member of Bob’s family....They had fun recalling the family traditions, and how Dmitry managed to fit in. He remembered their talent shows during holiday get-togethers, and how he once dressed up as each family member and did funny impersonations...”

To read the full story, visit: http://www.bradleyherald.com/2012/09/host-dad-visits-russia-after-18-years-2/

---

**Civic Education Workshop**

If you applied to participate in the Civic Education Workshop (CEW) in Washington, D.C., stay tuned for the results! This is a special one-week program for approximately 100 FLEX students currently on program in the U.S. The program provides an opportunity for participants to gain a better understanding of some of the key concepts and values that are integral parts of U.S. society and culture.

During CEW, participants will have a chance to learn firsthand about civic education, leadership, conflict resolution, and tolerance through seminar discussions, briefings, and meetings. The workshop is scheduled to take place in March 2013.

Know anyone back home who is interested in applying for the FLEX program? Recruitment for the 2013-14 program year is already underway! You can direct your friends or family to the FLEX website (primarily in Russian, but a list of hub office contacts is also available) to find out when and where testing will be held as well as eligibility requirements: http://flex.americancouncils.org/
“We ❤️ FLEX”

Looking back at 2011-2012, FLEX students express their gratitude.