

Texas 4-H Across the Globe

This summer, five youth from the Lone Star State traveled beyond our nation's borders through the States' 4-H International Exchange Program. The youth, ranging in ages 14 to 18 traveled to Japan or Costa Rica for a four-week homestay, often described as truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"Global Citizenship activities such as the States' 4-H International Exchange Program provide youth and families with life-changing experiences," Extension Specialist in the Youth Development Initiative for 4-H, Darlene Locke Ph.D. said. "The homestays provide a rich environment where they are 'immersed in the culture'; they are not there just to sightsee but they engage with the family each day!"



Stecher on a hike with his host family in Japan.

Reuben Stecher is a 10-year Kaufman County 4-H member going into his senior year of high school, and a Texas delegate who traveled to Costa Rica this past summer in what he called nothing short of an "eye-opening" experience.

"My favorite part of the trip was the relationships I formed with my host family," Stecher said. "We connected really early and they are now my family; they are my brothers and sisters and my extra parents and they happen to live in Costa Rica."

Stecher recalled family hikes, pristine beach visits, crystal clear streams in his Costa Rican backyard, going to school with his new brother, and even participating in a protest, saying his experiences ultimately cultivated a greater sense of confidence.

"During my homestay, I gained a little more independence and I feel more able to just go and do something and be confident in myself...maybe take a risk," Stecher said. "Teaching yourself and learning that you have the capability to be out there on your own, even though you've lived with your parents so long, but you still have the capacity to be more self-reliant, is very important to discovering yourself before you're thrown out into the world."

A common theme amongst all of the travelers was a greater sense of gratitude and "deep appreciation" as noted by Stecher, for the small aspects of their culture in America.

“All of a sudden I would notice things I would’ve never noticed before,” Stecher said. “I was more grateful for things, just the little things of daily life, and I have been much more observant of the things that we’re doing and how they are part of our culture.”

Katelyn Besler, a 4-H member from Terry County, traveled to Osaka, Japan, to spend her summer experiencing Japanese markets, shrines, festivals, bullet trains, and more with her host parents and sisters.



Besler with her host sister in Japan.

“It helped me better understand how to communicate with people that I don’t know anything about and a different culture,” Besler said. “That was the most intriguing part, seeing how people in another part of the world live.”

One of Besler’s favorite parts of her trip was interacting with the Japanese people who she deemed “the sweetest people she’s ever met”, which ceased all preliminary travel fears.

“I came back with this understanding that we’re all on this earth and we all deserve to be treated right, so you might as well be sweet to everybody,” Besler said. “I was extremely nervous, I had stressed myself out so bad, but once I got there, I realized everybody was so sweet and I had never experienced anything like that in America.”

Besler enjoyed her experience so much that now she dreams of one day returning and teaching others about her experience so that they will have the same opportunity. Stecher also hopes to encourage other Texas 4-H youth to embark on this type of journey.

“I highly recommend that anyone with the opportunity go on this trip, it was amazing,” Stecher said. “It doesn’t matter where you go, whatever country you end up going to, that’s one of the least important factors... It’s about meeting new people and learning there’s more to the world than what you’ve experienced growing up.”

Both Stecher and Besler learned of the exchange program in Japan after hosting a Japanese student here in Texas the summer before. Through the States’ 4-H International Exchange Program, Texas families also host youth and adult chaperones from other countries each summer, sharing “Texas hospitality and so much more” for four weeks each summer.

“Opening your home to a foreign visitor and treating them as ‘one of your own’ is one of the most selfless acts of service one could offer,” Dr. Locke said. “Many of the Texas Host Families



Delegate Kreede Orum with her host sister at a festival in Japan.

have kept up with their exchange delegates for twenty-plus years. The bonds made during these short four-week homestays are amazing.”

Texas 4-H will again host youth from Japan and South Korea in July-August 2020. To apply to be a Host Family, go to <https://www.states4hexchange.org> and click on the “Host a Student” tab. Youth 14 and older interested in traveling to another country such as Japan, Costa Rica, Norway, South Korea, Taiwan or Romania should contact Dr. Locke at dlocke@ag.tamu.edu for more information on the program. The deadline to apply is December 1, 2019.