

Dear STS Foundation,

It has been our pleasure to host exchange students. My husband, Bob, and I have hosted our 8th full year student, had 6 part timers, and are anxiously anticipating the August 8th arrival of our newest family member, Daniel, from the Czech Republic. What an exciting time this is.

From our perspective, awaiting the arrival of our next exchange student is much like the anticipation we felt when our own children were soon to be born. The only difference is that because they are young people, they are older and have gotten past the early training phases!

The hardest thing that we do each year is to say goodbye. I personally experience separation anxiety for weeks after they are gone.

It's not the same with our house being quiet and void of the activity and love that they bring us. With this, I do know how difficult it is for their biological parents to let them go away, for almost a year, to a place and people they are unfamiliar with. My oldest daughter, Lisa, has been an au pair in Germany for 4 years, got married to a German young man in July of 2003, and is beginning plans for them to return to the U.S. I know what it felt like to put her on a plane not knowing when she would return, if ever, and who she would be surrounded by. This same step takes the parents of our foreign exchange students a tremendous amount of faith in organizations like STS to know that their precious child will be safe and taken care of. I am touched by their trust in me to do a good job as a host parent, and love the challenge of doing so.

Our experience as a host family has been wonderful. We wouldn't continue doing this if we didn't feel we were making some kind of a positive impact on these young people. Selfishly, we receive so much in return that it's difficult to surmise in a few short words. Each year, our family expands and our knowledge of the people of our world grows stronger. We gain a new son or daughter, and an extended family overseas. Nothing could replace what hosting has done for us as a family short of, perhaps, adoption. Once a connection has been established, if nourished, the bond never goes away. Our first exchange daughter, Katrin from Germany, is still in touch with us, and we are enjoying the fact that her little 3 year old refers to us as Grandpa and Grandma.

Having said this, not every experience has been perfect. This seems to happen when personalities clash or communication isn't good between us and our student. Out of all of our hosting experiences, only one didn't work well. We did complete the year with this young lady, and I feel it made us all better communicators and human beings. I've seen host families that would have given up on such a situation, but we felt strongly that not every match is made in heaven. We learned that it was our responsibility, as well as our student's, to find compatibility and some form of harmony. One not-so-great experience taught us as much, or more, than all of the other good years!

Now our most recent exchange student, Rasmus, is home in Denmark. It has been a little over one month since he left, and he misses us and we miss him. That's all I need to know to understand that it was a successful year, and it was worth our while to take this wonderful young man into our home and show him what it is like to be American. Our hope is that we will see him again from time to time and continue a lifelong relationship.

We would like to thank all of you at the STS office for your support. It is important to us that someone is there to answer questions or offer us help when needed. Your quick responses didn't go unnoticed!

We appreciate all of the time and hard work you put into making this exchange organization, STS, what it is, and hope to help you whenever possible.

Our hope is that more families will open up their homes and hearts to exchange students. Many families, when approached about hosting, say that they wouldn't be good because they are too busy. My experience has been the opposite. The busier the family, the better the exchange student fits into our fast paced society! We also hear that families are too small and there wouldn't be enough for the student to do. Most exchange students have a great ability to find friends through their schools, neighborhoods, or extracurricular activities. These young people are very good at finding their own ways to connect with people their own age! The benefits of hosting are numerous. The only way to find out how much there is to be gained by becoming a host family is to do it!

Best wishes in all that you do!

Sincerely,
Jean Warfel
Host Parent, Illinois