

In 1927, Rotary club members in Nice, France reached out to their Rotarian counterparts throughout Europe and began a student exchange program, placing selected high school students from Nice in the homes of voluntary host families in neighboring countries. The common bond between participating cities was the presence of a Rotary club. The common goal: to promote understanding, appreciation and respect for the people and culture of other nations.

Believing that exposure to different cultures can be a powerful force for promoting international understanding and peace, Rotary International continues to promote and administer this program, the oldest of its kind in the world.

"We're the perfect international organization to do this," said Everett Schneider, chair of the local Rotary Youth Exchange committee. "As a worldwide body we have



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Donna, Everett and Natalie Schneider are one the families hosting Belgian student, Geraldine (Gege) Hentroteaux.

# Rotary Youth Exchange

by Peter Connor

Rotary Youth Exchange promotes international understanding and peace.

no political or religious affiliations, motivations or exclusionary agendas. We're just good people trying to do a good thing in the world."

In 1939, Rotary clubs in California began exchanging high school students with clubs in Latin America and, by 1958, clubs all across the U. S. were similarly engaged. In 1972, the Rotary International Board of Directors officially recognized the activity as the Rotary Youth Exchange program and recommended it to member clubs throughout the world. The program has continued to grow and now reaches into the homes, high schools and neighborhood communities of more than 82 participating countries.

Individual Rotary clubs around the world with administrative help from their regional Rotary districts, sponsor more than 8,000 international exchanges every year. Regional District 5440, with 48 clubs operating in Wyoming, Northern Colorado and the northwest corner of Nebraska, manage 25 to 30 of these exchanges. The four clubs in Fort Collins proudly participate, each sponsoring one student during the academic year.

In August 2004, two weeks before the fall semester, this year's Rotary Youth Exchange students settled in with their host families. Representing Belgium, Iceland and Italy, they took the plunge into the everyday life of an American family. In January 2005, they will be joined by a student from Australia. Corresponding to the school year "down under," she will arrive in Fort Collins just in time to begin the spring semester.

As students from other countries were being welcomed to Fort Collins, local students were arriving in France, Brazil and Thailand, completing the exchange. Their applications had

been received by the Fort Collins Rotary Youth Exchange committee one a year in advance of their placement. To be eligible, the students had to rank in the upper third of their high school classes. To be selected, they had to possess community leadership skills, open minds and flexible attitudes.

Candidates who are accepted into the program agree to abide by all Rotary Youth Exchange rules (which include no drinking, no drugs, no driving or operating motorized vehicles, and no exclusive dating). As a foreign guest and youth ambassador, they agree to attend their scheduled classes and use the language of their host country.

The students, all between the ages of 15 and 19, along with their host families, share an intercultural experience designed to foster global peace and understanding through one-to-one contact at the local level. To get the most exposure possible, each student lives for up to three months at a time in three different homes.

In the months they spend together, the hearts and minds of many will be touched, new subjects will be studied, strange foods tasted and unfamiliar holidays celebrated. Language barriers will be struggled with and conquered. Perceptions will be altered and new ways of looking at the world will be adopted. Ways of living will change. Young people will grow up and grownups will reach out. Together, they will learn new things about themselves.

Students and host families will mingle their lives and share their ups and downs. Tolerances will be tested and adjustments will be made. And when the year draws to a close, circles of friendship will be wider. The world will appear smaller. People, once strangers, will be drawn closer; and between them the fabric of human experience more tightly woven. ■