



ARLINGTON SISTER CITY ASSOCIATION

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NEWS FROM ASCA

An ongoing series of reports, articles, and news items about the Arlington Sister City Association's programs and activities, plus news from its Sister Cities

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Adventures of a Host Family

by **Grace Chang**

***Editor's Note:** ASCA's High School Home Stay Exchange enables qualified students from our sister cities to attend high school in Arlington for a semester or a full academic year. It also allows Arlington families to become immersed in a rewarding, long-term cultural experience. In this article Grace Chang describes how hosting a girl from Aachen in spring 2017 enriched the lives of herself, husband Todd Cummings, and their high-school age children Sophia and Matthew.*

We have been back for three years since our three-year assignment in Germany and we still cannot stop waxing nostalgic about our adventures abroad. The culture, the lifestyle, the people-we felt welcomed not only in Germany but all over Europe in spite of the learning

curve. Little did we know at the time that we were setting the stage for our foray into hosting foreign-exchange students. That had not been on our radar!

Enter the Arlington Sister City Association. We were already somewhat familiar with ASCA, thanks to good friends whose children participated in the elementary exchange program with Aachen. In light of their positive experiences, we agreed to host a young lady from Aachen in the two-week high school program in October 2015. Our daughter Sophia was starting ninth grade and had a little German language under her belt, so she was ready for the experience. To me, it felt as though we were paying it forward by introducing a German teenager to America and making her and her classmates feel as excited and welcome as we had felt living in Germany. The two engaging and well-planned weeks with our highly intelligent and cheerful exchange student passed all too quickly.

Fast-forward about two years...and I found myself reading an email from ASCA seeking a host family in the Yorktown school district for another young lady from Germany. This time, however, she was not coming for two weeks but for a full semester. That would be a bigger commitment for sure, but then I read about her interests-soccer, singing, playing cello, working with youth at her church-and I gulped. She sounded just like our daughter! Plus, she was in the same grade. I knew I had to reach out and express our interest.

The rest was serendipity. Truly, we could not have orchestrated it any better ourselves. As it turned out, Insa Obrikat had been to the United States on a shorter two-week exchange program in Phoenix the previous year and her host mother there had attended Yorktown High School and still had family in Arlington! What were the odds? We felt like this was meant to be despite some initial trepidation at the thought of having three teenagers (including our son) under one roof and perhaps not enough space, time, or energy to spare. But those fears were soon quashed.

Like our previous two-week exchange student, Insa was spunky, smart, and sweet. She wanted to try everything and was not daunted by anything. Her excitement was infectious.



Insa Obrikat from Aachen (right) and her host brother Matthew Cummings

Her English was quite good when she arrived (certainly a lot better than our German!) but she had an even stronger command of it when she left five months later. We saw our daily life through her eyes and the more we did the more we wanted to expand her experience, in part because it also enriched our own. In addition to visiting the usual monuments and museums, we took her to several sporting events, a trip to New York City with our mother-daughter group, a long-weekend beach trip to Ocean City, a wedding in North Carolina...the list goes on.



Insa and Sophia attending a Nats game at Nationals Park

Insa and Sophia were on the same soccer team and sang together in our church youth choir. We attended live concerts and theater; she met both sets of grandparents and other family members; she tried various cuisines from all over our diverse community. She was an outgoing young lady, so she made friends easily in every class she attended at Yorktown. When she turned 16 in June, we threw a Sweet 16 party for her and her new American friends because this was not a German custom.



Insa's Sweet 16 party

She was thrilled. Around the same time, her parents visited us from Aachen. They were simply lovely people and we chatted easily and laughed over a German card game one night that they had brought over for us. By the end of the semester, Insa was a bona fide American high school teenager. Always courteous and considerate, she fit into our family's routine as if she had always been there.



Sophia and Insa enjoy sushi at a restaurant in Arlington.

We still miss Insa but in our hearts we know we have essentially gained a German daughter and sister. She and her family will always be welcome in our home. Being a host family has been a joy and a gift for all of us. We will always feel blessed for the opportunity to have had this meaningful cultural exchange. The girls still stay in touch regularly on social media and we talk about returning to Germany for a visit. Knowing Insa, though, she will be back to visit us before we can say Aachen!



ASCA Seeks Host Family for Spring 2018

ASCA is seeking a host family for its High School Home Stay Exchange in spring 2018. This is a wonderful opportunity to help a young person from abroad experience life and culture in the United States.

The program is at the heart of ASCA's mission of creating bonds between people from our sister cities and the people of Arlington. In addition, the program benefits host families and local school communities. Students frequently report that their experiences are "life-changing," and indeed they often make friendships that last a lifetime.

ASCA is looking for a family to host Lennart, a young man from Aachen who will be in the 10th grade. He will come to Arlington for the spring semester beginning in January 2018, and will stay through the end of the school year.

Ideally the host family lives in the Washington-Lee High School district and has a son (or

daughter) who attends W-L. You can learn more about the program from our website. Follow [this link](#) and click on Homestay Program on the far right side of the page.

If you are interested in hosting Lennart or learning more about our program please contact Daphne Lathouras, ASCA's local coordinator for the High School Home Stay program at ascahighschoolhomestay@gmail.com.

The Arlington Sister City Association (ASCA) is a nonprofit organization established in 1993. ASCA works to enhance and promote Arlington's international profile and foster productive exchanges in education, commerce, culture, and the arts.

<http://arlington Sister Cities.org/>

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