



NOT YOUR TYPICAL YOUTH EXCHANGE HOST FAMILY

Kirsty Pitman from Monbulk, Victoria, was the 1998 Western Australian state public speaking winner in the Lions Youth of the Year competition and a judge in the 1999 competition. She explains how she and husband Adam became a first-time host family in 2011.

“We’re hosting a young German girl through the Lions Youth Exchange Program next week,” I told my friends at our weekly coffee session. “You’re what?” they asked. “But ... why?” “Why *not*?” I replied.

We have a spare bedroom and bathroom, I only work part-time, we are financially stable, I love playing ‘tour guide’ and we thought it would be interesting to find out more about another country from someone who lives there. If we were fifty or sixty, I’m sure none of our friends would have questioned our decision, but I’m 30 (my husband, Adam, is 34), we have a two-year-old daughter, Eleni, and neither of us is a Lions member.



Left: *Kirsty Pitman, husband Adam Chapman and daughter Eleni*



Right: *German Youth exchangee, Sarah Heider, feeding the rosellas at Grant's Picnic Ground*

Our hosting experience began with a return ferry trip to collect 21-year-old Sarah Heider from Camp Koala at Queenscliff. Three other youth exchangees caught the same ferry across to Sorrento with us and I remember thinking I would have been happy with any one of them. They were all mature, positive and motivated to learn as much as possible about Australia. The German boy even engaged my daughter in a spontaneous game of peek-a-boo and pulling faces.

Any fears my husband and I had held about sharing our home with a stranger were quickly allayed. Sarah was a great conversationalist, intelligent, knowledgeable, tidy, organised, punctual and considerate of others. She fitted in really well ... in fact, the night after Sarah’s departure, my husband remarked that it was strange *not* having an extra person in the house!

We managed to cram as much as possible into Sarah’s nine days with us: we did the coastal walk at Cape Schanck, browsed Australia’s best scrapbooking store in Mornington, went up the Eureka Tower in Melbourne city, shopped at the Queen Victoria Markets, visited the quaint towns of the Dandenong Ranges, explored the goldrush era at Ballarat’s Sovereign Hill, watched the penguin parade at Phillip Island, fed the cockatoos and rosellas at Grant’s Picnic Ground, braved the Rainforest Gallery aerial walkway, climbed the lookout tower at Mt Donna Buang, admired the Aboriginal sculptures in the William Ricketts Sanctuary and ate cake and drank hot chocolate at every possible opportunity. As Sarah is studying to become a teacher in Germany, I arranged for her

to spend a day at a Catholic secondary college near my work. This was an enriching experience for both Sarah and the students.

Our first hosting experience exceeded our expectations. My husband and I learnt so much about Germany from Sarah and I am pretty sure we enriched her understanding of Australian life. Although she had already been coerced into trying Vegemite at Camp Koala, we were pleased to offer her a few new 'firsts': Tim Tams, risotto, peanut butter, fudge and rocky road, to name a few.

Our daughter can now identify the German flag, locate Germany on a world map and loves telling people that Sarah lives in Germany. As she gets older, I can see the potential for the Youth Exchange to be a living geography lesson for her (especially if we host a young person from a different country each time).

Contrary to the self-absorbed image of 'Generation Y' often portrayed in the media, Sarah voluntarily cooked dinner for us on two nights, helped with the washing up the nights I cooked, kept her bathroom and bedroom tidy, was ready at all the times we agreed, thanked us for everything and spontaneously assisted Eleni with various tasks. There is obviously some expense (both time and money) involved in hosting so it was really nice to feel that the effort was mutual.



Left: Sarah panning for gold at Ballarat

Right: Sarah and Eleni before visiting the penguin parade at Phillip Island



If I had to offer new host families four tips for a successful experience, I would say:

- Try hosting for one week the first time as it is less daunting and the time really does go quickly!
- Consider the hobbies listed on the young person's application form if you are offered a choice of exchangees. I think part of the reason Sarah fit in so well is because we opted for a young person whose interests were similar to ours and therefore suited to our semi-rural location and lifestyle.
- Exchange a few emails before the exchangee's visit so he or she knows what to expect during the homestay and also to build some rapport.
- Don't think you have to come up with all the activity ideas yourself. I was surprised when Sarah asked one evening if we had any board games to play. I dug out Trivial Pursuit and she, my husband and I did battle!

We really enjoyed hosting Sarah and would be happy to host another Lions youth exchangee in the future. For anyone thinking about hosting, I would strongly encourage you to give it a go. You have little to lose and so much to gain!

For further information about the Lions Youth Exchange Program go to www.lionsclubs.org.au/ye or contact your local Lions Club