

FOR EST CITY Summit *The Britt* News-Tribune



Local dentist Rhonda Budlong has spent the last couple months bonding over winter weather with her exchange student, Zsofia Winter, 16, who is here from Hungary for a semester. (News-Tribune photo by Mary Loden)

Cold Iowa welcome for exchange student
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By MARY LODEN, Of the News-Tribune

Hungarian student Zsofia Winter finds out what her last name really means in Iowa

Zsofia Winter, 16, a Center for Cultural Interchange (CCI) student from Budapest, Hungary arrived at the Mason City Airport amidst the early January snow storms and sub-zero temperatures that forced many schools to cancel for four days or more.

Despite the snow and cold she was happily greeted by her host parent, Rhonda Budlong, of Britt, who viewed the incident as a learning opportunity. “Welcome to Iowa,” Rhonda said with a laugh, “ she has used the snowblower four times.”

Through CCI Zsafia's twin sister also came to the United States and is living with a family in Corpus Christie, Texas. “Some think her sister is lucky, but they have no snow in Hungary and she (Zsafia) gets to experience snow that her sister can't,” Rhonda said.

“It is a great way to promote world peace by learning from each other and different cultures - promoting tolerance,” said Kim Gillman, the area CCI representative for this region.

“Our organization will place approximately 1,000 students nationwide this year, and I am in the midst of finding families for 25 students at this time. It is a great opportunity for families and the students.”

“I have always wanted to have an exchange student, especially since I've been overseas for four years. But I lead a very active life as a single parent and I was not sure I could do it,” Rhonda said. Her daughter Megan, a student at West Hancock High School, was very open to the idea so when they saw in their church bulletin that CCI needed to place a few more kids they decided to try it.

CCI places students for a full or partial school year depending on the student's wished. Zsafia is only here for one semester and will go back home in June.

“At first it was my mother's idea. Mother thinks languages are so important and she wants me and my sister to speak very good English so we can get a good job and go to University,” Zsafia said. “A friend over here in the U.S. for a year recommended this program - so I said why not?”

School in the United States is often one of the biggest surprises to many foreign exchange students. In their schools sports and extracurricular activities have no part so they try to get involved in as many things as they can.

That is a little difficult when a student arrives in the middle of a school year. However, Zsafia's most memorable experience is still all about school.

“My first school day, that was so weird, rushing all the time,” Zsafia said with a smile. “The days here are longer. In Hungary we attend school from 8 (a.m.) to half past 1 (p.m.) and have longer breaks in between class periods, 10 to 20 minutes. And not much homework.”

Her hometown of Budapest has 2 million people and there are 10 million total in Hungary so coming to small-town U.S.A. was quite a change.

“It's so different that everyone knows everyone,” she said. “I like that everyone is friendly here; in Budapest no one knows no one.”

But living in a small town just means you get to travel more. With the Budlongs Zsofia has attended several programs in the NIACC Concert series and spent the past weekend in Kansas City, Mo.

“I meet with friends every year in the Branson area, just to get together,” Rhonda said. “They have a German student and I thought it would be great to get them together.”

Zsofia has walked out on a frozen lake and will see her eagle in a few weeks at a bald eagle habitat in Winona, Minn.

In May Rhonda said she take the Hungarian teen to her parents farm and weather permitting, hopes to get her out on water skiis and a jet ski at their cabin in Clear Lake.

But life at the Budlongs isn't always so busy. Zsofia said she likes walking the dog and bowling and playing card games with Rhonda. Cards is one thing she had never done before in Hungary and Rhonda has taught her several games.

Being away from home is difficult, but being away from a twin, especially when that twin is also in the United States, is even harder but Zsofia said she sees this as a growing period for her.

“I have very good relationship with my sister, but I want to know what it is like to live without her for this time, to know I can make my own decisions,” she said. “I write a diary every day so I can show her later.”

Megan Mazzoni, when she isn't at school or work, finds life with Zsofia very interesting. “It's different and it's fun. I've been used to just myself for three years. It was weird the first two weeks,” she admitted.

She has been learning a few words in Hungarian but the best part, “the meals she cooks are amazing,” Megan said.

Zsofia likes to cook and even brought over some traditional spices, such as red pepper and paprika. Not all the ingredients she is used to can be found here so she has learned to make substitutions.

She also enjoys American food and hasn't discovered a food yet that she doesn't like. "The first thing I ever made for her - and she loves them - are Scotcheroots," Rhonda teased.

As Zsofia took plates out the cupboard and started to set the table Rhonda said, "she fits in so well with our family and she's so eager to work."

So what will Zsofia tell her friends about being an exchange student? "It is very cool. Sometimes it is very hard but you must get used to it," she said.

Another CCI student in the area is Cesar Goncalvez, from Brazil. He is also here for only one semester and is staying with a family in Mason City and is attending Mason City Newman.

"Cesar is doing very well at the school. He enjoys reading, watching sports, swimming, basketball and cooking. I know he has asked his host family to teach him to cook American," said Kim Gillman. "His family is having a great time with him."

To learn more about this non-profit organization and becoming a host family go to www.cci-exchange.com. A host family is responsible for the student's three meals a day, transportation when needed and providing a safe, loving home atmosphere for the student.