

Skaneateles High School: creating a peaceful world through youth exchange

There is a moment during every graduation ceremony along the shores of Skaneateles Lake when the audience erupts in applause. It is when Skaneateles High School Principal Georgette Hoskins singles out the year's exchange students and asks them to stand up for all to honor. Community members and teachers cheer. Students shout out the names of the four or five exchange students who have become one of them.

Youth exchange is a big part of life at Skaneateles High School. For decades, the small rural/suburban high school (population 605) has enriched and diversified its student body by hosting at least four or five exchange students each year. Most are Rotary Youth Exchange students but some are from PAE, YFU, AFS and EF. They perform in school plays, debate with the Model UN Club, do service projects with the Interact Club and become a part of the fabric of the school community. Since 1996, 48 in-bound exchange students have attended SHS.

When Rotary asks the SHS administration to add another exchange student, the answer is always an enthusiastic 'yes.' The support network in school is deep. Guidance counselors go the extra mile with exchange students who want to get a Regents diploma.

The high school enthusiastically promotes youth exchange to its own students. Former exchange students return each year to speak to an auditorium full of juniors and seniors about their experiences abroad. They visit language classes, speaking with a new fluency. They generate interest with their visits: 11 students went abroad in 2005, and six for each of the past two years, where class size has averaged 125. Since 1995, 64 SHS students have gone abroad! As a result, they have gone on to work for the vice president of the US, the Olympics and the Peace Corps; they've studied foreign relations and have become bi-lingual doctors and teachers.

This year, the bulletin board in the main lobby of the school includes a giant map of the world, with photos of current exchange students from Argentina, Belgium, Switzerland and Germany. The giant headline "Know the World Around You: Create Awareness, Encourage Action" focuses on the global theme of the year. (Current efforts include a school-wide drive to support medical clinics in Sudan – made personal by "Lost Boys" of Sudan who live in the area).

New exchange students are welcomed with special events, student-written newspaper articles and invitations to speak. For example, last year Haruka from Japan introduced the Middle School Multicultural Club to rice balls and origami; Paulina from Mexico and Nico from Argentina enhanced the Mexican Fiesta at the elementary school. When Skaneateles hosted a weekend program for Rotary exchange students from throughout District 7150, Skaneateles schools welcomed 40 students from around the world – a mini United Nations – into their buildings on January 26, 2007, to teach, play and learn. The students started the day at Waterman School where they introduced themselves in their own languages to 400+ very wide-eyed kindergarten, first and second graders. At the middle school, they answered questions from sixth graders during social studies. Later, they sat at desks alongside third, fourth and fifth graders. On another note, the community and the high school located and rented a harp last year, so that Marie-Annick from France could enhance the high school orchestra with her beautiful playing. Coaches include exchange students on any team they wish to join, even if they've had no experience. There is a forever-etched memory of the brand new soccer player from Kazakhstan who was put in to play during the final game of the season, and scored a goal. He was carried off the field by teammates as fans in the bleachers stood cheering wildly. These are just a few examples of what happens every year.

And there are the thousands of moments that come from living together day-by-day. The countries the students come from become more than far-off places on a map of the world for SHS students: they become places that house people they love. Thailand is where Deer and Pop live. Venezuela is home to Andres. Italy is the home to Alberto. These are friends who sang together in chorus; studied and laughed together in study hall, and held hands together as they jumped into Skaneateles Lake on graduation day.