

To Relive one's Past

Statement of Experience

Jennifer Ruh and her children participated in the German-American Youth Exchange Program in 2011. Her children were 18, 12, 12, and 8 years old when they hosted German students. She contributed the following statement:

Why did you decide to take in a German student? What were your motivations?

Firstly, I wanted to expose my own children to other cultures. Secondly, I meant to “pay back” for being an exchange student myself, since I spent a year in Europe when I was younger. Another reason for deciding to host was that I loved continuing the tradition of my family. Growing up we were always having exchange students. Even though I was one of ten children, we always had a room for one more! I learned a lot about other cultures and enjoyed having foreign children living with us.

Did you have any reservations about taking in a German kid?

No, I had none reservations whatsoever. Although my German was rusty, I knew most European (and international children) have a much greater fluency with English (and other languages) than the typical American student has with foreign languages.

What was of importance for the decision? What factors helped you to decide to host?

My own kids had to be old enough both to benefit from the experience, and old enough to help. I've been a single mom of four kids for ten years, so I couldn't host a child while they were young and I had my hands full.

Did you have any expectations and did the German students “live up to those”?

I “expected” the students to have a good command of English, because the German students I knew were more or less fluent in English. Furthermore we have several German friends over 3 generations who speak English very well. The 2 German students we had had a good knowledge, as well. We had a 16 year-old boy for a year, and a 15 year-old girl for 2 weeks. I think the girl would have opened up more if she had stayed longer.

Are there any experiences which left their mark on you? What was special?

We still are in touch with both students. When we next go to Europe, we definitely will visit the boy who lived with us for a year. We still think fondly of him as one of our family.

Did you go through problems/conflicts/struggles? How were those overcome?

At first, our exchange student had to get used to the "rules of the household"; clean up in the kitchen after each use, help with chores, etc.

They were overcome by my emphasizing these were the rules by which my children had to abide, so they must, too. The girl who only stayed two weeks was most like a visitor and we had no problems with her.

Did the stay of the German student influence anything? Did it change you in any way?

It helped me again appreciate different cultures. I've been so busy working and raising four kids these past 20 years, I "forgot" how much I enjoyed my own year in Europe! Hosting German children reminded me of how much fun cultural exchanges are.

Would you recommend taking in a foreign student? Why (not)?

Yes, if you have a little extra time, and wish to expose your own children to perhaps a life-changing experience, I recommend hosting a foreign student. I was/am a single mom of 4, a practicing physician, and was still able to manage hosting. The way I was raised and my birth family's motto (always "room for one more") made the decision easier. It was a great experience for all, and we have absolutely no regrets!