



This year's 12! Eduardo, Katharina, Aaron, Melissa Hiday, Alex, Coyo, Crystal, Said, Zuzana, Matheus, Julia, Matilde and Nikki. *Photos provided by Melissa Hiday*

Hiday brings the world to east-central Indiana; one student at a time

I have always told my children when considering what to do with their lives, "take something you love to do, then find a way to make a career out of it, whether it pays a huge salary or nothing." It took me 25 years to take my own advice. Twenty-five years ago I never would have dreamed that a group of teenagers from around the world would change my life.

In a community that is about as culturally diverse as a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, I wasn't expecting to become a mother figure to a bossy German girl named Karen and a sweet South Korean girl named Jueun. When they came to New Castle as exchange students in 2009, I was oblivious to the multicultural world out there. These two young ladies, with their beautiful accents and open-minded willingness to share their cultures

and stories, came to my home on a regular basis with my daughter Shannon. Sometimes they came to spend time in my kitchen while I cooked for them or lounge on my couch watching "The Gilmore Girls," laughing and talking like every other teenage girl.

My dream job

Many pancakes, mozzarella sticks and jars of Nutella later they had left such an indelible mark on my heart and completely changed the way I viewed the world that I knew working with exchange students was my dream job. A wise friend told me that I should work for this exchange program as a representative and that I would be good at it; I jumped in, unaware that giving my time and energy was fraught with challenges.

Weeks later, seven sad, miserable Americans accompanied our German and

Korean daughters to the airport for an unforgettably traumatic goodbye. We all knew that our lives had been changed permanently by two unlikely people. Did I want to go through goodbyes like this every year? Yes! Not because I am a masochist, but because the 10 months of experiences that come before the goodbyes completely outweigh the temporary sadness.

Since summer 2010, I have worked with 32 exchange students from 13 countries. Brazilian, Korean, Mexican, Italian, Vietnamese, Columbian, Chinese, Thai, Swiss, Czech, Spanish, Danish, and German teenagers have come to our community and left their marks. Each student has come into my life, and the lives of many others, with fascinating stories, traditions, honest and sometimes hilarious questions and a lifetime of experiences.

Exchange students come in many shapes and sizes, and in many colors with many languages, but they all have one thing in common: a passion to learn about life in the United States. These kids leave their home countries for five to 12 months to live in a foreign land with strangers.

They travel as little as eight hours and as far as 31 hours across multiple time zones through up to four airports to experience things most of us take for granted. They leave behind loved ones, their native languages and their sense of security to embark on adventures of a lifetime. I don't think I would be brave enough to leave home for a year to live with people who didn't speak English and had never eaten an Oreo. No exchange student returns to his or her homeland unchanged.