

Outgoing Finn wins friendship, awards during American stay

By CAROL MAHONEY

When you are 17 and separated by an ocean from family, friends, and familiar surroundings, you could be homesick and miserable, or, you can enjoy and take advantage of an ideal learning experience.

Perky, bright Terhi Lehtonen, who speaks four languages, falls into the latter category. Called "Terry" by her American friends, Terhi arrived in this country from Finland last August to spend her twelfth year of education at Birmingham's Detroit Country Day School.

Under the auspices of Youth For Understanding, an international student exchange program, Terhi has spent the last nine months living alternately with two families. The arrangements were made, she explained, after she inquired about the program two years ago at her mother's suggestion.

Competition for space in the program was keen, she recalls. "Less than 40 per cent of the students who apply are accepted."

Selection was a complicated procedure during which her grade point average, scores on language tests in both English and Finnish, and a lengthy personal interview were all factors in her selection.

The panel of interviewers both surprised and amused her, she said, when they asked "How long do you think that it would be before you would feel free to go to the refrigerator and help yourself?"

TERHI SAID she has had no problems adjusting to American households. "I was very fortunate to get two nice families," she said. "I like them both very much."

Her home away from home for the first semester was with Mr. and Mrs. Ward Randol of Birmingham. She is now completing the year at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Loren Riley in Birmingham. Both families have teenagers who also attend Detroit Country Day.

Terhi's fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes fit the traditional Nordic image perfectly. An articulate spokeswoman for her country, she hopes to clear up any misconceptions Americans may have about Finland.

"A lot of Americans are concerned about our relationship to Russia," she said. "They think of Finland as a kind of satellite country such as Poland."

To illustrate talks she has given before several civic groups, Terhi brought slide films of Finland with her. She is most anxious to speak before other clubs or school groups before she returns to Finland.

"I like to answer questions about my country," she said. Even questions pertaining to socialism in Finland don't stump her. "I like people to be frank with me," she said.

Terhi thinks that the differences between Finnish and American people is mainly one of temperament. "Finnish are quite shy," she said. "You have to get to know them well. When you do, they are loyal and nice people."

She finds Americans quite outgoing and friendly. She also observed that the Americans she has met are quick to refer to acquaintances as "friends."

"In my country we have a special word for friends that would include only five or six people who are extremely close. We would use another word for all others."

She was also surprised by the external show of patriotism in America. "We don't sing the national anthem at the beginning of athletic events. I was amazed when everyone here stood up and sang the 'Star Spangled Banner' as the flag was raised," she said.

However, even though the Finns do not outwardly demonstrate such national pride, she believes that they are fiercely patriotic. "Because we are a small country, we have to keep together in order to survive," she explained.

DATING among teens is another area of contrast, Finnish boys are

quite shy, she said. Dates are always "dutch treat." In addition, Terhi believes there is more individual dating here as opposed to group activities in her native Finland.

The struggle to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment is another aspect

of American life that puzzles her. "It is generally accepted in Finland that women work outside the home," she said. "Men help with the housework." She explained that her father owns a small industrial design company. Her mother is a gymnastics teacher.



During interviews that preceded her selection for the Youth For Understanding exchange, Terhi Lehtonen was surprised and amused when panelists asked her how long it would take her to feel free to help herself from a host family's refrigerator. (Photo by Stephen Cantrell)

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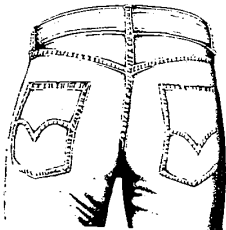
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