

TRAVEL

Exchange student discovers spirit of Finland

(Caitlin Kilhka is the daughter of Kenneth and Barbara Kilhka of West Bloomfield and a junior at Bloomfield Hills Lahser High School.)

BY CAITLIN KILHKA
SPECIAL WRITER

As the icebreaker ship Sampo cut through the 12-foot ice off the coast of Finland, I stood in the bow and turned my face toward the wind and the sun, reflecting on the path that had brought me here as an exchange student on an academic year in this arctic atmosphere.

Nothing I had experienced as a 16-year-old student at Bloomfield Hills Lahser High School had prepared me directly for the plunge I was about to take - first into this new culture and within moments now, into the waters of the Gulf of Bothnia clad only in an insulated, orange wet-suit. Surrounded by tourists from many countries and my Finnish host father, I held my breath and jumped off the edge of the ice into the buoyant sea.

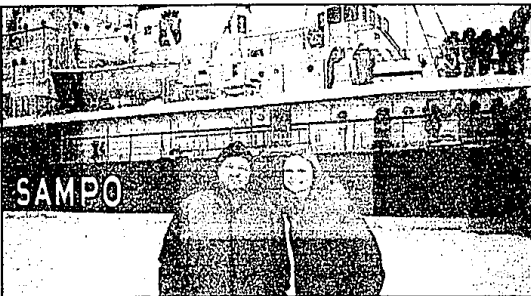
Perhaps there is no better way to experience a country and a culture than in this method open exclusively to teenagers - diving right in as an exchange student living in a family. After a wonderful summer in Germany as a Youth for Understanding (YFU) exchange student, I committed myself to spending my junior year of high school in Finland, the land of my great-grandparents.

In August of last year, I arrived in Finland with 32 other students from various countries who would also spend the year here with YFU. After a week of orientation, language learning and some fun together, our families arrived to take us to our new homes.

My new parents, Kari and Maija Liisa Korhonen, quickly made me feel at ease as we headed toward the northern city of Oulu, a modern city of 100,000 on the edge of Lapland and the Arctic Circle. Together with their children, my new sisters Laura (14) and Terhi (3) and brother Kari (12), we live in a charming older home located in a pleasant area near my school. Through my siblings, I learn the most Finnish because they are so patient and willing to teach. My youngest sister teaches me Finnish words while I teach her the colors and animals in English.

Daily life with a new family has brought me many familiar routines: school, homework, daily chores and good times with friends. But there have been many adjustments, too. The language was challenging at first, but since so many people spoke English, it was never a major problem.

Classes at my high school, Kastellin Lukio, are taken in a six-week cycle followed by exams then a new schedule in the next cycle. In the beginning, I was able to select classes where language skills were not so important, such as computers, art,



Icebreaker: Caitlin Kilhka and Finnish host father Kari Korhonen prepare to embark on the icebreaker Sampo cruising the Arctic Circle.

music, gym, English, German, Swedish. Now, as I have become more proficient, I have been able to take physics, math, geography, Finnish and other more challenging courses.

The relationship with teachers here is much more casual than at home. Teachers wear jeans and sweatshirts as the students do and are addressed by their first names or simply as "Teacher."

The most exciting school tradition I have participated in was the "Vanhojen Tanssit," the Old Dance, held in February. Planning for this pre-mid event began in September when students began inviting their partners and planning their attire.

In February, the senior class completes classes and begins months of individualized study for their final exams before graduation. At that time, the junior class becomes the "Olds," the oldest class at the school.

To celebrate, the juniors have a dance where they dress in clothes from earlier centuries and dance the dances of bygone eras: waltzes, polonaises and so on. My date and I spent many mornings at the special dance classes preparing for the event, often laughing at our awkwardness while a vociferous old woman taught us the precise steps.

My host mother worked many hours, making me a stunning



Reindeer: A Lapland reindeer farmer shows Caitlin around.

purple and silver Renaissance-style gown that I hope to wear again next year at one of Lahser's dances.

The night of the dance was magical, seeing all my friends transformed into ladies and gentlemen from another era. We danced the whole evening in the ballroom and then went to a teen club to eat and dance to music of our own generation.

I feel fortunate to be able to experience Finnish traditions like this that tourists never see, but I have also enjoyed many of the more typical tourist activities.

On two ski trips to Lapland, one with my family and one with the YFU students, I enjoyed the pristine beauty mountains, forests, lakes and rivers. My family stayed in a lovely cabin at the ski resort Ylläs. Downhill or cross-country skiing filled our days. Sometimes, we faced brutal early morning temperatures of 25 below zero, but the afternoon sun and evening sauna gave welcome warmth. After sitting in the sauna at 170m degrees, it truly feels good to step into subzero temperatures outside on the deck of even bath in the snowbank as my host

father did. After the sauna and then a few sausages cooked over the open fire, one feels at peace with the world.

In the nearby town of Kemi, I embarked on my icebreaker in the world.

Also there, we visited the Lumi Linna, or Snow Castle, a huge edifice of snow housing an art gallery, chapel, restaurant and children's play area. Out on the ice nearby, one could see dog teams mushing to a nearby island and also parasailers being pulled by snowmobiles. The Snow Castle, an annual event in Kemi, is different each year. With more than 1,300 feet of walls rising up to 30 feet high, the 1998 castle was designed by architecture students at the University of Oulu. The pews in the peaceful chapel pews were made blocks of ice covered with reindeer skins.

While I have enjoyed experiencing Finnish traditions, I know that it is equally important to share our American culture with my Finnish family and friends.

On Halloween, my English teacher asked me to show the class how to carve a pumpkin and said she would bring the supplies. As far as I knew there were no pumpkins in Finland, but she proudly brought in some old newspapers, a knife and vegetable resembling an overgrown cucumber which she smugly

announced was a "summer pumpkin." I dutifully carved the strange vegetable, lit a candle and watched it catch on fire during my little speech about Halloween traditions.

As the year goes by, I treasure the many experiences I have had and look forward to more to come: a boat trip to Sweden with the other YSU students, the Midsummer Night holiday in June, vacation my family here and friends. When I return home in July, I know that my ties will continue with the warm and friendly people here who have come to mean so much to me.



That's cold: Caitlin Kilhka floats in her insulated suit in the Arctic waters off the coast of Finland.

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