

The American Spirit

By Sara V., AYA Exchange Student from Italy hosted in Pennsylvania

When I first arrived in the United States, I felt like I was watching an amazing movie. I could see everyone laughing and talking in the hallways, but I didn't know how to join the conversation. Even though I had studied English for years, the American high school experience felt like an intimidating machine. I was worried I would spend my entire exchange semester just being "the exchange student": a guest watching a story that had been unfolding for two and a half centuries without me.

Everything changed when I joined the cheerleading team. At first, I just wanted to stay active, but I quickly realized I had joined much more than a sports team. In this country, school spirit is a tradition that brings people together, and my teammates helped me feel belonged in this new world. They didn't see me as a visitor; they saw me as one of them, a new friend with a nice accent.

I'll never forget a particularly tough afternoon practice. I was struggling with a new routine and felt completely out of place, ready to apologize for being the "slow learner" of the group. Before I could say a word, one of my teammates grabbed my hands and said: "Don't worry, we've got you." At that moment, the language barrier simply disappeared. I wasn't just a girl from another country anymore: I was a teammate.

When we practiced stunts, I had to trust them to catch me, and they had to trust me to hold them up. That kind of physical and emotional trust builds a bond faster than any classroom ever could.

Standing on the football field under the bright Friday night lights and looking out at the crowd, I realized that while this nation is currently reflecting on 250 years of history, that history isn't just made of old documents; it is made of millions of small, noisy, and vibrant moments just like that one. It is made of millions of amazing people that welcome you in their country.

Cheering for our school, I wasn't just watching America from the outside; I was contributing to the energy that makes it feel alive.

Belonging didn't come from suddenly speaking perfect English or knowing every local custom. It came from the sweaty practices, the nervous energy before a pep rally, and the way my team made me feel like I had a home away from home. As the country marks this major milestone in its journey, I am so grateful that my own small chapter is filled with teamwork, friendship, and a community that truly let me in.