

## Two Homes, One Heart

By Maya Z., AYA Exchange Student from Germany hosted in Tennessee

“Two homes, one heart”, a title that not everyone understands. As I closed my door, I looked one last time in my room, the place that holds thousands of memories and I knew, when I come back, it will be different- I will be different. Car packed, silence, the airport, full of people. “Don’t look back.” And I tried really hard not to, but seeing my family, my home one last time? Who cannot resist this opportunity to look back, hugging them tight and breathing in their personal smell of security, of home?

I opened the doors to my new room, looked around, and took in the unknown features. Soon I began to unpack: I hung photos on my walls, put books on my shelf, and hung clothes in the closet. This will be my new home. Home? Could this place ever feel like a place of comfort and peace, filled with laughter and joy? Time passed, and I was in school, surrounded by curious students who asked me tons of questions and wondered how I could leave my hometown. Actually, I was wondering that too sometimes.

Clubs and sports started to integrate into my daily life. Starting with basketball cheerleading. A sport, I have never considered doing in Germany. With strong determination, I worked hard to earn a place in the team. Now, my Tuesday and Friday evenings take place in a packed gym, a student section filled with students who cheer for the players and cheerleaders supporting their teams from the sidelines. Coaches and a team, who would go through fire for each other, grew to become family. Whenever the players scored three points, we would do handshakes or when we won, we would always come together in a circle and would do our cheer loud and proudly.

Not only my team, but also a church community welcomed me. Wednesday nights were filled with praises and worship. Christianity had a different influence on me. The feelings of loneliness turned into fellowship. Sometimes that doesn’t mean a person, but the spirit of God walking me through life with them. The awkward chatters and misunderstandings quickly changed into more: into love. Our car rides are always special. We would sing songs together, talk about our lives, or play “What am I?”.

Our weekends are always packed, who knows what is happening next in this family! In the summer, we would jump in the pool, and in the winter, we would watch a movie with hot chocolate and brownies together. I will never forget my host mother's face when I told her I hadn’t watched typical American Christmas movies like “Elf” or “Christmas with the Kranks”. Her eyes were sparkling and she was excited to show me her movie collection.

Cuddled up in the bed, she would occasionally check my reactions to the scenes she had watched so many times. Not only my host parents, but my host siblings earned a place in my heart. Despite small fights or inconsistencies, which sometimes happen, we spend evenings together in our rooms until midnight and have tons of sleepovers or baking sessions with blasting loud country music, which is common in Tennessee.

Not only are they counted as family, but also all my friends I met throughout the year. Blessings to the people who were patient with me, and took the time to get to know me. Friends who would come to every single game of mine, even alone. Friends who would gift me a handmade puzzle for my birthday and every piece represents a memory of ours. And friends who would plan a fancy breakfast, but end up at In-N-Out.

Soon the time will come, and I will leave. My home, my family, my life, which is weird because won't I return? Returning to my room which door I haven't opened in a year, hugging the family I haven't seen, and petting my dog, which I missed so much. I will leave home to go home, leave my family to see my family, and leave my daily life to return to mine. Two homes, one heart- the sentence a lot of people won't understand, but makes perfect sense for me. Because yes, the unknown house filled with laughter, the strangers became family, and place to feel loved and secure, another place to call home, made it worth it.