

# How Small Acts Build Big Communities

By Tara B., AYA Exchange Student from Germany hosted in North Dakota

It was 3:59 a.m. when I finally received the email I've waited for the past 268 days. The letter from my organization woke me up like no energy drink or coffee ever could. Being placed in a small town in North Dakota, with fewer hills than you can count on both hands, wasn't what I thought my exchange year would look like. But now, looking back, I can say this was the best thing that could have happened to me.

The first time that I got to experience community here was when I joined the cross-country team. My prior running experience was, as some would say, limited. Hence, that and the fact that I was joining a team 3 weeks after the season had already started, it was certain that I was beyond nervous for my first practice. I was walking out of the locker room, opening and closing the calculator app on my phone so I don't look lost, wondering if this was the right choice after all.

I started overthinking everything I did leading up to this moment, when I heard my name from behind. When I turned around, there was a girl with the brightest smile on her face that I hadn't met yet. She apparently knew I was one of the two foreign exchange students, and then she told me how happy she is that I decided to join this sport, and started walking towards the track. She introduced me to all the other girls on the team, who were more than happy to show me how to do the warm-up exercises and even ran with me at my pace so I wouldn't be alone. That night I went to bed glad I joined cross-country after all.

After my first ever meet and a lot of potlucks, we finally had our home meet at the golf course. A few weeks before, our coach gave us all paper forms for the t-shirts we had to sell. When I asked him what this fundraiser was for, he explained that this year the budget for the coaches has been reduced, and his two assistant coaches were sharing one salary. Therefore, it was only natural for him and the whole team that they would somehow come up with the money themselves, so that both get paid in full. At that home meet, we not only sold enough shirts to raise the money, but one of the student's uncle also decided to donate 300\$ when he heard of the reason for our fundraiser.

This whole season helped me understand how important community is in the United States. The girls I met didn't know me, but immediately welcomed me and made sure I felt included and helped when our coaches needed us to do so. This is what makes this country so great in my eyes. The way strangers become friends through small acts of kindness. The way people help others out without thinking twice. These teenagers are people who shape the future of this country and make the society more open minded, empathetic, and connected. Those actions contribute to this amazing culture of diversity and inclusion and influence the community right now and also the future of this nation.