

Life, as we know it (or don't)

By Naya J., AYA Exchange Student from Jordan hosted in South Carolina

“What did you learn about home during your exchange year?” The prompt asks. It should be quite easy to answer that question, shouldn't it? But my exchange year has taught me to give it my all and so, dear reader, allow me to take you down the longer road... If you look for the word “Home” in the dictionary or simply google it, they'll tell you it's “..the place where a person lives permanently.” The funny part is, had I seen this question before taking off on my exchange year I would have agreed without so much as a second thought.

But if these past few months have taught me anything it's the fact we, as exchange students, are living proof the dictionary has got it all wrong; for us, home is not only a brick building we grew up in, home is also halfway across the world in towns we knew nothing about but found endless love in. Home is a fire lit within us because we leave one to build another and then leave it once again.

I have spent the entirety of my life living in one city, walking the same streets and attending the same school and although that isn't inherently a bad thing; familiarity is comforting, especially for someone still figuring out the world around her. I knew only the sounds and smells of one home, memorized the habits and little quirks of one family. And for the bigger portion of my life I was content with calling only that “home”, not knowing what the future I feared had hidden for me.

Now, I find I know another place like the back of my hand. Now, when someone asks where I'm going and I say home, the picture in my head is no longer the same, no longer only one. My home has gotten bigger, better. I know my way around two houses in the dark, where things you wouldn't normally think about like silverware and plates go and, not to mention, where to find the good candy at.

Currently, I'm writing this while sitting on my couch, in my living room, next to my dog. And it's absolutely crazy to think that, just at this time last year, the previous statement wouldn't have even existed. I'm grateful to say I now have people who taught me another type of love, not the kind of love you're bound to by blood or years of knowing the other but the love that comes from living with someone through the highs and lows of life and still having fun in the process.

The word home now reminds me of two houses, one I grew up in and the other I grew wiser as a person in. Both filled with love and memories of different fonts.

So even if our days together are approaching their dreaded end, even if our next meeting may never occur and all we will have of each other are memories frozen in time or a picture frame, that fire will always keep burning.

I am forever grateful to my host family, my second home. Grateful for all the memories they'd made, the goodness they engraved, the endless patience they displayed and for the love that through it all, strong and steady remained.