

A cultural exchange in Bland County

By JASMINE DENT FRANKS | Staff | Posted: Thursday, September 15, 2016 6:00 am
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At 19 years old Rita Koch had never tasted apple pie. She'd also never had baked beans or made s'mores. Not because she didn't want to, but because where she is from, in the mountains of Austria, things like baked beans and apple pie are unheard of.

That all changed for Koch this summer when she visited the United States as an exchange student through the International 4-H Youth Exchange.

During her 10-week visit, Koch divided up her stay in the U.S. among five families throughout Virginia. Her final two weeks will be spent in Bastian with Bryce and Beth Burnette and their daughters Shaley and Miranda.

"I really like it here," Koch said. "Everyone is really friendly and welcoming. I've had a lot of neat conversations with the people."

Koch, who came to the U.S. to improve her English, chose Virginia because of the commonwealth's range of beautiful cities and expanse of countryside.

"The coordinator asked what state I was interested in. I said I wanted to go to the East Coast because there are a lot of cities like New York and D.C. My coordinator recommended Virginia because there are cities, but there are also nice countrysides. It was a good decision."

Two days after her high school graduation from Raumberg Höhere Schule in St. Martin, Austria, Koch boarded a plane, bound for the states. She arrived the last week of June.

"I wanted to stay as long as possible. Plane tickets aren't very cheap, so I wanted to make my stay last as long as possible."

Koch said she's made the most out of her stay in the commonwealth. She's visited cities like Richmond, Charlottesville, D.C. and has even ventured to Princeton, West Virginia, and spent time on a few beaches in North and South Carolina.

"They were all really nice," she said. "I really liked Richmond. It's just a great city because I like to walk by the river and it's so green there. I just like it. I also visited the Blue Ridge Mountains. I like it there because



Exchange student

Rita Koch with her Bastian host family: Bryce and Beth Burnette, second row; Shaley Burnette and Rita Koch, first row. Not pictured is Miranda Burnette.

it reminds me a little bit of home. In Austria we also have mountains, just a little higher.”

Koch noted she was also pleased with her visit to Monticello.

Beth Burnette said that Koch’s visit has had a positive impact on her family.

“We’ve learned a lot about other cultures,” she said. “It was very interesting to know what the other side of the world thinks. It’s a really good experience for our girls to learn about other parts of the world.”

Beth said becoming a host family happened by accident after a host family the Burnettes go to church with had unforeseen circumstances come up and were unable to host a student from Norway earlier this summer.

“We probably never would have thought about it, but when the call came out that there was a need, we talked about it and said, ‘yeah, we’d love to.’ It’s been a great experience.”

Koch, who plans to teach English back home in Austria, said her visit to the states has certainly helped her speaking skills.

“I’ve visited Britain before, but the language there is much different. When I first got here, language was very hard for me, because of the different accent, but after a few weeks it was no problem at all.”

Koch said she enjoyed getting to learn more about American culture.

“It’s interesting. Some things that are common here, like food, I’ve never heard of,” she said.

Beth said she has a remedy for that.

“I always make sure my mom, who lives next door, cooks up a big country meal for them.”

Koch said she will head back to Austria with a much better understanding of the English language—and American cuisine— next week.

For those interested in going abroad, the International 4-H Youth Exchange is now accepting applications for outbound delegates. Applications are due by Dec. 1, with partial scholarships available. For more information, contact IFYE coordinator Dottie Nelson at 1-304-431-5317 or at dottieifye@yahoo.com.

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