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Shelburne Rotary Youth Exchange finds new life after 25-year hiatus

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After roughly 25 years on the sidelines, the Shelburne Rotary Club's youth exchange program has returned ? and its first year back has been more successful than organizers expected.

The revival began when local student Mike Niedzwicki approached Rotary about participating in the International Youth Exchange program.

Bill Waite, the Youth Exchange chair for the Shelburne Rotary Club, said that Niedzwiecki was the driving force behind the revival of the exchange.

?If it wasn't for our outbound student Mike, who ended up going to France, reaching out to us, we probably wouldn't have done this exchange this year,? he said. ?Once he did raise the possibility to us, we thought that this was a really great program and opportunity. We've been uninvolved for a very long time, but [thought] let's look at this again.?

Niedzwiecki's interest prompted the club to reconsider a program it had discontinued 25 years earlier and ultimately led to Niedzwiecki travelling to France for an 11-month exchange. That same interest ended up being why Niedzwiecki was chosen as the outgoing student.

?We were already behind the curve for this year's exchange program,? Waite said. ?We knew that we already had a student that was already interested, so we thought, why not talk to Mike, and if he's a suitable candidate, why don't we go with him? In some respects, he kind of deserves it, because he was the one who got us going.?

At the same time, Shelburne welcomed Natalie Worst, a 15-year-old student from Switzerland who turned 16 during her stay. It was her first extended time away from home, and she spent nearly 11 months living with three different local host families.

The arrangement was designed to give Worst a broad experience of life in the Shelburne area. She stayed with Karen and Terry Webster, then with Niedzwicki's family, and later with Janet and Brian French of Lennox Farms. The different households exposed her to cottage life, school and family routines, winter activities and farming.

Worst experienced fishing, boating, ice fishing, snowboarding and a trip to Florida, among other activities. She attended the local high school, rode the school bus and took part in everyday family responsibilities, including shovelling snow.

Rotary organizers emphasized that exchange students are treated as members of their host families rather than guests.

?The idea of the exchange is that students are not pampered when they come here,? Waite said. ?They're integrated as part of the host family during their stay. That means they pitch in around the house, help prepare meals, and clean up snow in the winter. They get to live the full Canadian experience. This isn't to say we didn't spoil her a little bit, but we wanted to make sure she understands Canadian life and what it's all about.?

The local school community and Upper Grand Valley District School Board were also instrumental in making the revived program work. Although there were some administrative hurdles to restarting a program that had not been used locally for decades, organizers said the attitude remained consistently focused on finding solutions.

The experience also created connections extending beyond Shelburne. Worst formed close friendships at the high school and with

other exchange students from around the Rotary district. Niedzwicki similarly made international friendships during his time in France, with some of those connections continuing into travel plans after the exchange.

For the host families, the experience brought its own rewards. Organizers described the families as enthusiastic and committed. Worst's eventual departure was marked by the realization that strong bonds had formed during her stay.

Worst later described the exchange as the best experience of her life and said she would do it again.

Niedzwicki also returned from France with positive experiences and new friendships.

Despite the success, the club was unable to find an outbound student for the current exchange cycle. One interested student ultimately decided the program was not the right fit at this point.

Rotary, however, is not giving up. The club remains committed to trying again next year, with the hope that Niedzwicki and Worst's experiences will encourage more local students to consider the opportunity.

?The club is certainly committed right now to try again next year to find an exchange student,? Waite said. ?Now that Mike is back, when we do try again next year, he can come in and speak directly to the school and meet some students who are interested. We're going to keep going with this, for sure.?

?Its an opportunity for students to have, quite frankly, a life changing experience.?

The Rotary Club believes the successful revival has demonstrated that the program can once again become a meaningful part of the Shelburne community.