

2009 YFU USA Story Contest

Thank you for voting! The results are in and the winners are:



First Place: *It All Started with Markus* by Mary, host mom in Lansing, MI.



Second Place: *Open Kitchen, Open Hearts* by Alayna, Japanese Alumna from Cary, IL.



Third Place: *Try It! Our first exchange student to our fourth...how it all started* by Dorothy, host mom from Allen, TX.



Story Finalist #2 - Winner

It All Started with Markus

Once again, I lay awake in the middle of the night wondering if we made the right decision. Inviting a foreign exchange student into our home for a year was a bit frightening to me. Was this going to be a good experience or a mistake? Would Markus be a burden to us, would he fit into our family? Would this be a positive experience for our son? The questions in my mind were many.

Finally, the day came that he was arriving from Germany. We were nervous as we drove to the airport and then waited for his plane to land. When Markus arrived, we found that he was more nervous than we were. He was hardly able to speak. It was a quiet ride home. After a tour of the house and a snack, we all relaxed and started to get to know one another.

Later in the day we took Markus to the high school so he could see where he would be going to school. We walked into the front door and Markus stopped dead in his tracks. "Look" he exclaimed, as he pointed down the hallway. I looked and saw nothing but lockers and classroom doors. He said again, excitedly "LOOK"! Again, I saw nothing, so I asked him, "Markus, what do you see"? Markus exclaimed, "It's just like in the movies"!

That was the moment I fell in love with Markus, and I fell in love with being a host mom. We are now hosting our 6th student and hope to host many more. Each one of them has filled our home with joy, love and laughter. Sharing our home and our culture with them has enriched our lives more than we could have ever expected.

Saying goodbye to our student in June at the airport is, by far, the toughest day of each year. They become so much a part of our family. Each has taken a small piece of my heart with them when they leave. I remain connected with each of them with emails and birthday cards, etc. I can't imagine not having them in our lives.

I think back to my fears of hosting before Markus arrived. I am so glad that we persevered through the doubts and fears and became a YFU host family. I think it is the smartest thing we've ever done. Our family has grown in size and grown closer. So thank you to Markus, Joschka, Philipp, Yuan Bo, Rabea and Philip for all you have given us.



Story Finalist #1 – 2nd Place

Open Kitchen, Open Hearts

Timidly, I crept into the cluttered, tiny kitchen. There was hardly enough room for MaMa, my Japanese host mother, to move around in.

“Can I help you?” I asked her in Japanese.

“Yes,” she replied, and put me straight to work. She handed me a bowlful of rice. I knew what to do at that point, and rinsed it in the sink until the water came clean. But all of a sudden, a question came to my mind.

“MaMa, why do we wash the rice first?”

“Not good taste,” she told me. She pointed to the bin of thick, stinky paste used to make homemade pickles on the wide windowsill. “*Onaji*; it’s the same.” No wonder we washed the dust off the rice!

When I was done with that task, MaMa let me cut vegetables for that night’s dish: Japanese curry. As I peeled, sliced, and chopped, I thought about how glad I was I had asked MaMa to teach me how to make Japanese food. I had come so close to not asking her out of sheer nervousness. But as we worked side by side, MaMa showing me by example how to cook, I found that cooking was one of MaMa’s passions. And for that I was glad, in discovering one shared passion, we had become much closer, our once awkward relationship becoming more one of a mother and daughter.

An bell sounded, signaling PaPa’s return from his dentist office just as we put the finishing touches on the curry. Yuuka, my 20-year old host sister, put chopsticks by each place setting. Rika, my 17-year old host sister, put the chilled green tea on the table. The rice cooker beeped out the melody to “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” letting us know the rice was done. MaMa scooped it out, putting a generous portion on each plate, spooning the hot curry on top. The carrots, beef, and celery swimming in the thick brown sauce reminded me much of stew from my native country, but its sweet, spicy smell was entirely different.

As much as I loved making it, I loved eating the food MaMa and I prepared together even more. Part of this was due to our dinnertime routine; my favorite part of the day was sitting around

the table with my host family. I scooped the rice and savory, spicy sauce into my mouth, my tonsils feeling its gentle warmth. PaPa cracked jokes as MaMa helped me tell of assisting in English class today, filling in the Japanese words I didn't know. Yuuka and Rika told stories too, laughter punctuating the air. Most of the laughs we shared were around that table. It was experiences like these, our togetherness both in the kitchen and around the table that really mattered. It was our laughter and our togetherness in the space of an everyday event that ultimately transformed us from strangers from different countries to a family that spanned an ocean.



Story Finalist #3 – Third Place

Try It!

Our first exchange student to our fourth...how it all started.

We had no idea how much our lives would change when I received an email in my My Space inbox during the spring of 2007. It asked, "Have you ever considered hosting an exchange student?" and that's all it took. Aaron and I talked about it for a few days and by the time the spring had turned into summer, we were officially registered and on our way to becoming host parents. Stephanie came to us from Aalen, Germany and everything clicked so well that we couldn't have asked for more.

All of the details were ironic. She was from Aalen and we live in Allen. Her high school mascot was an Eagle, so is ours. So many things were like that we thought it was definitely meant to be.

Wanting to expose her to as much of the United States as we could, we took her to Washington, D.C., did a Texas tour and traveled to San Antonio, Austin, my husband's alma mater, Baylor and even took her to Sea World, Six Flags in Arlington and Disney World in Florida. We miss her dearly.

She became our daughter during that school year and we have enjoyed staying in contact for the past two years, in hopes that she will return to the US for college next year.

We could have never anticipated how instantly we became a part of her family, having never met them until our visit to her home in August, 2009. The moment we arrived we were instantly a part of the family. We were welcomed with open arms and treated as though we were always a part of the family. It was absolutely amazing and the most wonderful feeling. We are already planning another trip next summer, back to Europe to visit all of our kids.

Stephanie from Germany, Kirsten from Denmark, Alba from Germany and now Christian, also from Germany, are all a part of our lives for forever. Our family doesn't feel whole without an exchange student and we have a hard time imagining it any other way. You will never know how awesome it is, until you open your home and your heart and try it!