

## Foreign Exchange Students Interview

- Kathleen Alexandrou

Some people have travelled all over the world by age ten. Some people don't get on a plane until they're in their mid-30s. Some people take annual road trips around the country. And some people spend many months in a foreign country, surrounded by strangers, just taking it all in and learning. These incredibly brave, open-minded, amazing people who leave their friends and families all in the name of education are foreign exchange students. I interviewed three of Marblehead High School's eighteen foreign exchange students – Camilla, Marco, and Bruna; from Milan (Italy), Monza (also Italy), and Sao Paulo (Brazil), respectively. All of them had some idea about American culture, whether from prior trips to the country, or American friends, or things they saw on TV coming into this experience.

No matter how much you learn about someone else's culture, however, you can't fully grasp everything until you've lived in it. There are little things that we Americans have always done, things that to others are just weird. Camilla said, "People put ice in my beverage – like in Coke. No. Here in America you use a lot of ice. It makes it watery and I don't like that. Too much ice in everything." Marco agreed with Camilla, adding, "Yes, more that you like everything cold. Even air conditioning, we don't have it at all. I mean yeah, we turn it on when it gets really hot in the summer, but here I noticed that even two weeks ago it was freezing in here. The AC, and ice and like everything. Even the milk! In Italy there's no cold milk. You buy cold milk obviously, but then you heat it up. You drink hot milk, like cereals it goes with hot milk, and for breakfast it's hot milk with breakfast. So I got used to drinking cold milk pretty fast, but it's weird because for you it's like the opposite. Even cappuccinos, we have extremely cold coffee with hot milk. I'm doing the opposite here, with cold milk and hot coffee."

Another surprisingly big difference between America and the rest of the world (by which I mean Italy and Brazil) is friendships. In both countries, making friends, sitting with friends all of it is very different. Bruna commented that, "It's different in Brazil with cafeteria tables. Everyone sits together with all grades and yeah. And also I'd rather have male friends than female friends because it's 90% less drama, and I don't know, I don't see many girls sitting with boys here. I see tables of girls and tables of boys." Camilla noted that it isn't just friends who are different, the way people act in general is different in America. "[I love] the people. They are kind and they help. Friendly. They help me a lot. I've noticed that when you meet someone everyone says, 'Hi! How are you?'" In Italy, it's not like that. There are also kind and friendly people in Italy of course, but yeah, I've noticed this thing in American people, I like it." Marco agreed with Camilla about the politeness of Americans (which stereotypically, we aren't known for, so this bodes well for our global reputation). "Here people are much more polite than in Italy but it's much more difficult to make friends. We're stuck with one class for five years; that's why we know twenty people very well and no one else. I asked my host brother, let's take the train and go to Boston and hang out with people and he was like, 'yeah we don't usually do that, we usually go to a friend's maybe.' Yeah it's different. I hang out with more than ten people every day. [In Italy] I take the subway to Milan and just hang out. It's just, friendships work in a

different way. You really become close friends with people [in Italy]. I don't know if it's not working here because I'm an international student, but it's different that way."

Bruna brought up another point I hadn't considered. "One thing I noticed today actually, people tend to not like their government at all. Which is weird, because they have no idea what it's like to have a terrible government. Because we do have that in Brazil. They only see the bad points of it. [In Brazil] we pay taxes, our healthcare is not the best, like at all. Our public schools...only people who have no chance at all getting into private schools go to public schools; they're really, really terrible. Marblehead High School would be the perfect example of a top, top, top high education private school in Brazil because the public schools are just all downhill from there. And we're completely broke; the country is completely broke, and the economy is the worst. One dollar is worth four Brazilian reais (R\$), and that's a lot. It's not annoying [that people complain about the government], it just stands out to me because it could be worse. And since I can compare these two governments, it's just an eye opener."

Contrasting this rather somber perspective, Camilla put exactly what I personally have always loved about America into words. "I think the size of the country [surprised me], because America – oh my god, it's so huge. And Italy is smaller. I went to the Grand Canyon, I think it's a beautiful place. I like how there are beautiful places like the Grand Canyon and there are plenty of metropolitan cities, like New York or Las Vegas. But I like those things, how you can both enjoy yourself and relax in places like Grand Canyon and Lake Powell. I'm really happy to be here. Being an exchange student is probably one of the most beautiful things that can happen to you because you can see how people from all over the world live, and it's an opportunity that not everyone can have. It depends on your way of seeing things though, because if you're not interested in learning new things then... It's interesting. It's really beautiful. It happens once in your lifetime, and you can experience how students from other parts of the world live, and what they usually do and how they study."