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Someone You Should Know

By [Carol Pavlik](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 8, 2011

Volunteers in the News

When John Davis Says 'Get Outta Town,' He Means It

Elmhurst Rotarian John Davis says international youth exchanges could solve the world's problems—one person at a time.



In many ways, John Davis is an all-around Elmhurst kind of guy. He was born and raised here, graduated from York High School, and spent 15 years as a reporter, then editor, for the Elmhurst Press. Later, he changed professions and became a stock broker and financial planner. Since 1992, he's been running his own business, Mentor Capital, in—you guessed it—Elmhurst. Mentor is a fee-only wealth management firm that deals with investments, income tax planning, estate planning and risk management.

But with his roots firmly planted in Elmhurst soil, Davis finds time to be highly involved in the Rotary Youth Exchange Program, which keeps him connected to students—and other Rotary chapters—all over the world.

For five years, Davis was the youth exchange officer for the Elmhurst Rotary Club, working with foreign exchange students from all over the world, as well as the local students preparing to leave for their year-long exchange.

Recently, Davis was appointed as the inbound coordinator for Rotary District 6450, which includes more than 60 Rotary Clubs extending as far north as the north side of Chicago all the way down to Kankakee. Fellow Rotarian and Elmhurst resident Charlie Laliberte has taken over the duties of youth exchange officer for the Elmhurst Rotary.

Getting the whole story

The Youth Exchange program has become a passion for Davis, who loves foreign travel and learning about other cultures. These days, family trips often find him going to South America with his college-age children, Andrew and Alison, and his wife, Jaciene, who hails from Brazil. But he's traveled to other countries as well, like England, Scotland, France and Germany.

Davis said it's common for our international neighbors to get the wrong idea about Americans, and vice versa.

"All they know is what they see in the movies or read in the newspapers," he said. "And likewise, that's all we know about a lot of them. And that's not always the whole story."

To prepare for the inbound students, Davis coordinates finding host families.

"We typically recruit two or three host families for each student," Davis said. "Each student goes to one high school for the full year, but we like to give them two or three different family experiences."

Davis also notes that the shorter time frame makes the commitment for families less daunting.

The costs of the program are kept at a minimum since most of the coordination is through volunteer efforts.

"Nobody gets paid, except we do have to hire a travel agent to organize the travel and the visas," Davis said.

The Rotary also purchases health insurance for the incoming students.

"All the student has to pay for is their airfare and incidentals," said Davis, noting that the Rotary even gives each of the exchange students an allowance every month. "It's not very much, but it's enough to cover some of their incidental expenses."

Requirements

The requirements to qualify for the Youth Exchange Program are straightforward: The student must be between 16 1/2 and 18 1/2 years old when they leave in August for their year-long stay, and they must be in the top half of their class academically.

But being successful as an exchange student relies on more than numbers and percentages.

"They're really brave to do this," Davis said. "If you can imagine being that age and leaving home, going to a totally foreign place where they've never been before, a totally different language, different food, different money, different customs. It's a big thing."

Davis said the ideal candidate for a cultural exchange should "do well academically, be fairly independent minded, gregarious and make friends easily."

Enormous Impact

This year, York High School is hosting two Rotary Youth Exchange Students: Manon Schmit of Belgium and Phillip Schulz of Germany.

"For Manon and I, John is there on a weekly basis, since we talk with him and my Youth Exchange Officer Charlie Laliberte every Thursday during our Rotary meetings," Schulz said. "John always helps us if we have any needs or problems, and he took us to Wisconsin for a skiing trip."

In an essay he wrote for his English class, Schulz reflected on the way the cultural exchange has affected him:

"As an exchange student, one is forced to become more prudent and mature. This year abroad had an enormous impact on my personality, by teaching me to respect other's ideas and thoughts, by showing me another part of the world with its people and places. Through this experience I became more outgoing and open-minded ... Now I look at my everyday life with a totally different perspective and I gained a lot of self-respect. I never felt so proud of myself and I do not regret my decision about spending a year abroad."

For Elise Waite, a senior at York, Davis got her thinking about whether she could be an exchange student. Waite met Davis while he was mentoring her older brother, Ian, who spent a year in Mexico.

"I was interviewing with [Davis]," remembers Waite. "He asked me questions like, if I could eat anything, would I be able to do it? It really helped, because based on those types of questions, I really convinced myself, 'Yeah, I can do this.' It wasn't going to be so hard."

Waite spent a year in Thailand as a Rotary Youth Exchange student, from August 2009 until July 2010. Having never studied Thai, she quickly found a tutor who helped her learn the basics of the language before she flew across the ocean.

"When I talk to [other high school students] about my experience, they're like, 'Wow, that's crazy. I could never do something like that.'"

Waite knows firsthand that going somewhere completely different can seem overwhelming for students at first. But she hopes she can convince more students to face the challenge of a cultural exchange in order to reap the overall benefits.

"It really helps to know another culture," she said. "I think it's really important. I learned so much about Thailand, and a lot about different types of people. I also grew myself. I know I feel more confident right now than I did a year and a half ago, definitely."

This couldn't please Davis more.

"I really think this exchange program fosters world peace and understanding, which is its goal, one person at a time," he said. "We want to expose people from other cultures and countries to what it's really like here—and what we're really like."

If you are interested in finding out more about becoming a host family for inbound students or applying to be an outbound exchange student, visit the [Elmhurst Rotary Club Web site](#) or check out the [Rotary International's page about the Youth Exchange Program](#).

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Charles Laliberte

1:46pm on Saturday, April 9, 2011

Thank you for getting out the word! The Rotary Youth Exchange program is indeed a wonderful opportunity for American students to spend a year abroad and for students from other countries to experience life in Elmhurst. The Rotary Youth Exchange is always looking for families willing to host. It is not necessary that the family have children the same age. In fact we have had exchanges with families who do not have children living at home any longer. The exchange program benefits all parties.

Thank you again for publishing this great opportunity.