

Felicia Viklund
 photo by Chris Fritchie



Swedish Teen Expands Her Horizons in Prosper

By Jennifer Nelson

IMAGINE LIVING in another country for an entire year. Now imagine doing that during high school – and having to repeat that year of school when you return home. Consider the excitement, the fear, and the wonder of being absorbed in another culture for an extended period of time.

Felicia Viklund is one of three students attending Prosper High School who is doing just that. She left her comfortable life behind to immerse herself in a different culture and expand her knowledge of the world. Felicia, who lives with her parents and two sisters in an apartment in the middle of Stockholm, Sweden, signed up with AYUSA, a nonprofit organization that

provides education and cultural exchange around the world. She was then paired up with Jim and Rebecca Schoonover, her host family in Prosper, whose children are grown and who wanted to help a young adult have a great experience in the U.S.

Felicia, who speaks three languages, said the choice to come to the U.S. was difficult at first. Her parents insisted that the experience would be rewarding, and Felicia eventually agreed. She was extremely nervous, especially the few weeks before she came to the U.S., but now she doesn't regret it for one second. "I love being here!" she exclaims. "I think it's awesome – which is my new favorite word."

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

When she first arrived in Prosper in August, though, she was immediately overwhelmed. "That first week I was so tired and everything was happening at the same time, explained Felicia. And my host mom was taking me shopping and Target® was the first stop. When we got to the toothpaste aisle and there were so many different kinds, I was wondering how I was supposed to choose one!"

This was just the beginning of the many differences in culture that Felicia has already experienced. In Sweden, living in the middle of a large city with public transportation and everything crammed next to each other is quite different than the sprawling landscape in Texas.

Felicia says the school system is also different. She explains that American high schools are much more disciplined than in Sweden, where they have 40-minute classes, longer breaks between classes, and sometimes attend school for only a couple hours a day.

Sweden also does not have anything that resembles Homecoming, so Felicia was greatly intrigued by spirit week, the mums – which she described as "huge!" – and the Homecoming dance.

She says the dating scene is different, too. "The boys here move pretty fast from friends to more-than-friends and they're more forward – at least the ones I met. And having to talk about whether you're boyfriend and girlfriend – yeah, that's something we did in kindergarten," laughs Felicia. "In Sweden, you just kind of know after a while– you don't have to talk about it."

One humorous situation Felicia encountered involved how Americans say "How are you?" or "What's up?" simply as a greeting. "For the first week in school, people would come up and say 'How are you?' and by the time I got an answer, they were already gone," said Felicia. "My host mom had to explain that it's just a greeting. In Sweden, if someone asks you that, they really want to know how you are doing. So that's been different, but I'm getting used to it!"

Felicia says some of her favorite things

here in the States are Oreos®, the food in general, and the shopping. She says she does miss her family and friends in Sweden, but she hasn't been too homesick yet because she's been so busy.

BRINGING WORLDS TOGETHER

Before coming to the U.S., Felicia had visited Thailand and many European countries. But she and her parents thought living in another country, not just being a tourist, would be a good experience. When people ask why she wanted to come to the U.S. and how she could leave her life behind, Felicia explains that she just wanted to expand her horizons.

"Most of the American kids have everything," says Felicia. "And, America's so big – you can drive to the mountains and to Florida. You don't have to leave the country to do different things. So, most American kids would never leave because you don't need to leave to see different things. But I wanted to experience something different."

And Felicia has made sacrifices to come here. Even though she is currently

enrolled in Prosper for her junior year of high school, she will have to repeat the entire year when she returns to Sweden. But, she says she's OK with that because she's not ready to grow up yet.

Mrs. Schoonover says the experience of hosting a foreign exchange student has already been enriching for her and her husband. "Just being able to share your home and help someone who is really beating down the doors to be here is wonderful. And these students who come through AYUSA are really the cream of the crop – they are responsible, and smart and are just great kids. And they're so appreciative that someone would take them in for a year."

Would Felicia and the Schoonovers do this all over again? Absolutely. The camaraderie and trust that has already been established among them and the sadness that creeps over them when discussing Felicia's eventual return to Sweden, are evidence that the experience has already been worthwhile.

Jennifer Nelson is a freelance writer who lives in Frisco.



*Felicia "at home" with Rebecca and Jim Schoonover
photo by Chris Fritchie*

WANT TO LEARN more about being an exchange student? Visit www.AYUSA.org. Mrs. Schoonover reminds families that all it takes is a willing and open heart to make the student's experience here rewarding. Financial obligations for host families are minimal and comprehensive scholarships are available for U.S. students who wish to travel abroad.

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