

Visiting via PAX

Program links students, families

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In Malaysia, there aren't such things as prom or Mexican food, at least where 17-year-old Jia Yeh Toh is from.

But, living in Jay County has allowed Toh to experience her first prom and order almost everything off of the El Camino Real menu.

"It is another special year for me. This is my first time coming to such a far country from my home and I just feel awesome," Toh said. "Now I have another family."

Toh is a student with the Program of Academic Exchange (PAX), which began in 1990.

The program places 1,000 students from more than 70 countries in homes annually. The students, typically ages 15 to 18, can opt to spend a semester or a full academic year at a high school in the United States.

In order to be accepted into the program, students must submit an application, pass an English test, provide health records, get immunizations, go through an interview and be mature and motivated. Then, PAX students wait months to connect with their American family.

Toh came to Portland after her host mom Chrissy Krieg took her English students to visit the CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center, also known as the Eva Kor Museum, in November.

"A little hand went up and there was this beautiful, eloquent question asked and it was accompanied by this really cool accent," Krieg said. "Then another hand went up, another cool accent, another hand went up and another cool accent, and I thought, 'Wait a minute. This is Terre Haute, what's happening? Where are we?'"

Krieg said she was originally interested in having PAX students speak at Jay County High School, but after the students spoke in early December, she wanted to host a student for the upcoming academic year.

However, when she heard back from the director, Krieg found out students were coming in January, so she signed up to host Toh.

Krieg said she wants to host again, but her main goal is to get other families interested in hosting.

"I think it's just a great benefit to our community and to our school to have kids here from different backgrounds and different parts of the world — different religions — because the diversity just helps us all understand and know better," Krieg said.

The most difficult part thus far, Toh said, was missing Chinese New Year.

However, Krieg said it's been easy for Toh to make friends because of how busy and laid back she is.

Toh goes back to Malaysia on June 5, right after she walks in the graduation ceremony June 3.

In August, Jay County High School will host another exchange student from Basque Country, Spain.



Jia Yeh Toh, second from left, is taking classes this semester at Jay County High School as an exchange student through the Program of Academic Exchange (PAX). Toh, who is from Malaysia, is pictured above with Joey Bailey (left), Kaitlyn Dow and Collin Haines prior to the April 21 JCHS prom. (Photo provided)

Erica Hathaway, a sophomore at Jay County High School, asked her parents, Susan and Les, if they could host after hearing PAX students speak in December.

"I'm just looking forward to seeing what kind of differences we have and how we can positively impact each other, what kinds of things we can connect over even though we live so far a part," Erica said.

At first, Susan wasn't sure she wanted to serve as a host parent, but after thinking about it she and Les agreed to take part in the program. She said she's excited to learn about the student's culture and how it's different from her own.

"It's kind of like an adoption. Once we went through the process and sat and reviewed the different girls and their likes and everything — we're really excited," she said. "It's going to be exciting to learn from her, too, her culture [and] how it's different from ours."

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