

Home > News Center > News stories > Exchange students, Part 2

Foreign exchange boarding students fall in love with remote Oregon towns - Part 2

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The high school foreign exchange students land in Redmond. For many from Europe and Asia, it is the smallest city they have ever seen. Then they head out of town.

They get to Prineville. They think a town can't get much smaller than that. But they keep driving east on U.S. 26 through the rugged Ochoco National Forest.

"On the way out, kids say, 'Oh my goodness! Oh, so much nature!'" said Nancy Moon, principal and superintendent for the Mitchell School District.

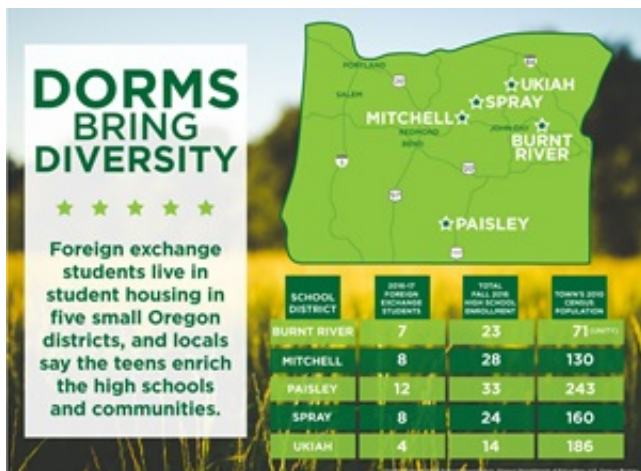


Foreign exchange students are usually surprised by the size of Mitchell. "We're like a microdot from where they come from," said Kristi Dennis, Mitchell librarian and special needs teacher.

And then they arrive in Mitchell, with its handful of cafes and shops. The attendant for the lone gas station sometimes watches the pumps from the porch of the 1930s Oregon Hotel across the quiet street. There are no stoplights, but there are a couple of street lights after all the businesses close by 8 p.m.

"We're like a microdot from where they come from," said Kristi Dennis, Mitchell librarian and special education teacher.

The students will spend the next year living in a dorm home behind the one-building Mitchell School District. The dorm has 19 students this year out of a high school enrollment at the beginning of the school year of 28. Eight are exchange students, and two others are foreign-born U.S. citizens.



Foreign exchange students living in dorms are essential to five tiny and remote Oregon school districts: Burnt River, Mitchell, Spray, Paisley and Ukiah. The exchange students make up about a third of the student populations in the schools, helping them maintain stable numbers and funding to support a more-rounded education.

In 2016-17, there were 39 exchange students in the five schools. The districts receive the same per-student funding from the state for the exchange students as they do for local students, between about \$7,200 and \$8,500 depending on other local factors. The sunset of a 2010 law would change that, taking away state funding for exchange students living in dorms.

The Oregon Small Schools Association is trying to extend the law this session. The schools say they would lose not only crucial funding but also an enriching cultural exchange that benefits local students and the communities.

But what about the teens whose year abroad lands them in remote parts of Oregon?

They tend to love it.

"It's awesome," said Toni Mueller-axt, a German exchange student in Spray. Spray is about an hour north of Mitchell. "It's really beautiful. The mountains are not just stones like in Switzerland. There are bushes and trees."



"I was scared to talk English," said Toni Mueller-axt (left) of when she first arrived in Spray. Now she happily chats in English with her friend from China, Yiran Xu.

Mueller-axt loved Oregon at first sight, but her reaction was in the minority. Most students, used to much denser populations, first register something between shock and horror at the tiny towns and wide-open spaces.

Doreen Williams, who has run the Mitchell dorm for 12 years, says she has had only one exchange student leave. One of her favorite stories is of a girl who got off the plane and announced: "There's been a mistake; I can't stay here."

The girl cried for days, wouldn't come out of her room, wouldn't eat regularly and kept repeating: "There's been a mistake."

Williams arranged for the girl to transfer, but the paper work dragged. When it came time to leave, the girl had adjusted and begged to stay. Now she comes back to visit Williams regularly and recently stayed for three months.



"I'm Australian, nearly 60, and I speak my mind," says Doreen Williams, explaining part of her success running the Mitchell co-ed dorm.

The Mitchell dorm is just a stone's throw out the school's back door, past a kids playground and an uneven basketball court. The sprawling single-story house can hold as many as 20 students. An array of couches fill a big front room that is connected to a spacious kitchen and a dining area with cafeteria-type tables and benches. Decks of cards, books and games rest on the tables. There are separate wings for the boys and girls rooms.

Williams is famous for miles around. It's no small task to run a house with a score of teenagers from wildly different backgrounds, with different eating habits, hygiene, cultural norms and accepted behaviors.

She mixes a no-nonsense attitude with a fierce and protective love. In the school office, she admonishes one of her students: "Mama knows."

Indeed, she runs her house like a family.

"This is a normal house," she says. "It just has more teenagers than most."



Doreen Williams, Mitchell dorm parent, tries to accommodate the national differences in taste for bread, meat, vegetables and pasta, while also providing treats, such as brownies.

Spray School District consists of five buildings. The old stone high school, built in 1920, now houses the administrative offices, a computer lab, the cafeteria where the whole school eats breakfast and lunch, and a school library that serves the town.

The current high school was built in the 1960s.

The Spray girls dorm is across the road from the school. It is a tri-level house, with generally two to a bedroom. The girls may end up hanging out or even sleeping in other rooms, however, as friendships build and interests align. Linda Donnelly, the dorm parent and surrogate mother who is retiring after six years, has her own space downstairs.

The house has a big, open kitchen, dining area and living room. The dinner table has long benches down each side. Over dinner, the girls from Vietnam, Slovakia, China, Morocco, Germany and Mexico banter and tease and share with each other.

“They are like sisters,” Donnelly said. “There is laughter and tears.”



Linda Donnelly, the Spray girls dorm parent, tries to make some of the dishes from the home countries of her foreign exchange students and other times she introduces them to American favorites.

Spray had been alternating boys and girls in the home across from the school, but the school board decided it wanted to expand its dorm program. Ed Knapp and his wife, Connie, bought a home a mile up the road four years ago and completely remodeled it. They both teach at the school and had hosted foreign exchange students before. This year their home has two Oregon kids and four exchange students.

Ed Knapp takes the boys to and from school in a small school bus. The exchange students aren't allowed to have cars or to even ride with the one Oregon dorm member who has a car.

The dorm parents try to give the exchange students lots of experiences, visiting local ranches and getting into the outdoors. The students help with chores and go camping. They take shopping trips to Bend and field trips to the coast and San Francisco and Seattle. For holiday breaks, dorm parents take exchange students to their family homes to experience American traditions. They also try to give the students some tastes of the homes they left behind, particularly come meal time.

“My wife spends a lot of time on Pinterest,” said Ed Knapp.

Morgan Myhre, an Oregon senior, has lived in Spray's boys dorm for four years.

“When they first get here, they are culture-shocked and don't want to be here,” he said of the exchange students. “By the end of the year, they don't want to go home. They find out there are a whole lot of things you can do besides shopping or going to the movies.”

Riku Hashiguchi, who is from Tokyo, tried to prepare himself.

“I Google-mapped it, but I was still very shocked,” he said. “It was very green and nothing here.”

Yet like all the exchange students in Spray, he says he loves it.

“People are nice here, a lot more than Tokyo,” Hashiguchi said. Like most of the students, he relishes the close relationships with the teachers and the people of the town and the peace and quiet. On a recent spring evening, the only sounds in the town were the cooing of doves and the occasional far-off whine of a table saw.

Exchange students love it so much, they often return for visits and even bring their families. One Spray foreign exchange class recently came back for a 10-year reunion.



"You can't get lost here," says Charles Cramer, the high school math teacher for Spray School District. He has three students in this class, one from Morocco.

Students praise the schools as well.

"Less people and the teachers are better," said Yiran Xu. In China, her classes routinely had 60 students in them, more than the entire Spray School District.

The small classes encourage more conversation, exploratory learning and individual attention. Teachers will often stay after school as long as students need.

"Most of my teachers aren't 7:30 to 4 p.m.," Mitchell Superintendent Moon said.

The foreign exchange students are coming to the United States to improve their English, usually so they can attend a U.S. university. Dorm rules include having only one student from any language, and students are strictly forbidden from speaking their native languages.

Dorm life for the students is mostly filled with school and sports. One of the selling points of the foreign exchange program is that with such small schools, everybody who wants to play can – even if they've never played the sport before. Spray has to join ranks with Mitchell and sometimes nearby Fossil to form teams. The schools take turns making the hour drive between the towns for joint practices.



Spray students travel every other week for track practice at Mitchell, partly because Mitchell has a dirt track and Spray has no track.

The students are enthusiastic about their experiences and the relationships they build. Teachers and superintendents at

the schools tell the same story: When it comes time to leave, there are lots of tears.

Noha Elgana is a U.S. citizen from Morocco who lives in the Spray girls dorm. She chose Spray after her sister went to Mitchell.

"It's like (leading) another life," she said.

Part 1 - Foreign exchange students offer more than survival for remote Oregon schools

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