

Being the new girl to everything

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Since I was a little girl I dreamed of exploring the world, running away, creating stories, living my life as if it was a movie. That dream became a reality for me about a year and a half ago.

My mom was an exchange student herself when she was young. She used to tell me stories about her adventures going to Australia as an exchange student. She made it sound like something taken out of a movie. Her stories made me want to find out what else is out there, they inspired me to want to become an exchange student myself.

Her host families would come visit us when I was younger. We would go on vacations with them, and call them uncle or aunt. I always thought they were a part of my family, even though I knew they weren't.

I wanted that. I wanted a family abroad.

I had just turned 15 when I applied to my local Rotary Youth Exchange Club. Everything seemed so unreal. I went to meetings, got accepted as being my town's youth exchange student, and quickly became known for that.

The months leading up to my day of travel were hard. I had decided I wanted to follow my mom's footsteps and had put Australia as my first choice in my application. The United States was my second choice, next after Canada, and so on. I wanted to get the American high school experience. I was lucky enough to get my second choice fulfilled.

I was going to the United States and I had never been more excited in my life. I made contact with my first host family and everything suddenly became a reality. I started getting nervous and excited but also sad, because I was leaving home for a year.

A whole year!

The longest I had been away from my family was about a week maybe. In a different country, alone, speaking a language I had learned from watching movies and hearing

music. It felt like a set up. All of it.

As weeks went by, everything became scarier and scarier. The thought of having to say goodbye to my friends, best friend and family overwhelmed me. I started having second thoughts and doubted if it even was the right thing for me to do.

But my mom stood up and said, "Liva, this is going to be the best and most encouraging year of your life. Live in the moment now, enjoy it and just take it all in."

She gave me motivation to keep going, not doubting myself, she gave me hope.

As I said goodbye to friends and families, the day of my travel became closer and suddenly my brother, mom, and I sat at an Italian restaurant listening to street music, in the capital of Denmark, Copenhagen. My brother handed me a gift that was supposed to remind me of all the qualities I had and how much he loved me. It was possibly one of the best days of my life.

The flight was 32 hours in total and went perfectly. My travel partner Christopher and I



Junior Liva Redhead poses with her mother and younger brother. **photo // provided by Liva Redhead**

had so much fun and couldn't wait to arrive at our final destination. My mom was right. I knew this was going to be amazing and as soon as I took the first step out of the airplane, stepping on Charleston's wonderful ground, my adventure started. My story started. Familiar faces and recognizable voices met me, welcoming me to a year of fantastic memories and experiences.

I have been here now for about three months and experienced more than I have ever experienced in my 16 years of life. It has truly been a dream.

Thank you, Mom, for being the biggest motivation and support and letting me write my own story.