

*The following “testimonial” was sent to me on September 6, 2018 by Riley Backus, a 17-year-old girl who lives in Clifton Springs, NY. Rilsy, who will be senior at Midlakes High School in September 2018, went on a Short-Term Youth Exchange (STEP exchange) to Italy for three weeks. Her family later hosted Martina Chignola (from Treviso, Italy) in their home as part of the family-to-family exchange. Here is what Riley wrote:*

Mr. Connelly,

First off, I would like to express my gratitude for the several hours it took you to coordinate this Rotary short-term exchange. Overall, I am so grateful to be a part of the STEP program, as it allowed be to grow in numerous ways, and foster international friendships. Over the past six weeks, I formed an incredible friendship with my host sister, one that I know will last for years.

On July 17th, feelings of nervousness and excitement consumed my brain as I was patiently awaiting Martina's arrival. Once Martina arrived, we began to talk, in English, about our cultures, traditions, and lifestyles. While in New York State, Martina received a wholesome glimpse into an American life by trying several local dishes (wings, ribs, hamburgers, cheeseburgers, etc.), and visiting our state's attractions including trips to several state parks, shopping areas, and unique eateries. Just before Martina left, she even witnessed the stark contrast between the slow-paced lifestyle of upstate New Yorkers, and the hustled life of New Yorkers who call the Big Apple their home. As Martina's exchange in America came to a close, we both elicited emotions of excitement, as my stint of the exchange would soon occur.

Upon my arrival, I was bombarded with friendly smiles from both Martina's family and friends. When I arrived at Martina's house I had my first bite of scrumptious Italian food—something I came to love throughout the duration of my stay. That evening I explored Treviso, the city where I lived, with Martina's extended family. Treviso was built in medievel times; while strolling down alleyways, I thought of the countless stories, and events that must have occurred on the ground underneath me. Venice was the first major city I visited, and it exceeded my expectations. Both tourists and locals alike were bustling through this charming city, but I simply enjoyed stopping to observe daily routines the locals abide by, and taking in the grandeur of the architecture built in the 11th century. The uniqueness of

Venice is astounding, as the canal system is unlike anything I had ever seen before. This sinking city was one of my favorites. Milan was the next major city I visited. Designer fashion shops, and upscale restaurants were located on nearly every street corner. However the vastness of Milan's Duomo (cathedral) was far more captivating than designer bags hanging in shops. Soon after Milan, I, along with Martina's family departed for our ten-day tour of Italy. Florence, our first stop was filled with art—from paintings, to the complex geometry of cathedrals. Florence truly produced so many wonders in the 14th century, leaving me feel grateful to see the works created by brilliant men at that time. The next city we visited, Rome, was astounding in its own unique way. Rome encapsulates centuries' worth of architecture, history, and art, making it a fascinating place. And wandering the streets of Rome felt movie-like, particularly when local artists played traditional music on handheld instruments. I truly enjoyed every moment of the three days I spent in Rome. Even reminiscing on my travels leaves a smile on my face. Naples was the final city on our itinerary. While Naples itself wasn't particularly beautiful, the Napoletano culture was both comical and fascinating, as it was completely unlike my own. The mannerisms of the Napoletanos coincide with the typical Italian stereotype in the US: loud, friendly, pizza lovers, and complete hand talkers. During my stay in Naples, I visited a series of cities nearby including the ancient ruins of Pompeii, and the charming cities located on the Amalfi coast. My favorite excursion the Campania region of southern Italy was the cape of Sorrento, which provided breathtaking views of the Mediterranean Sea.

While the tour of Italy was stunning and all, the part of the exchange I cherished the most was simply learning about Italy's fascinating culture and language. Rotary's exchange allowed me to live in someone else shoes, and to observe the daily rituals held by Italians. Perhaps just learning bits of Italian was the most valuable experience I had, as learning, and using new vocabulary elicited feelings of pride within myself. Now, after returning to America, I have so many fond memories, and wonderful experience I hope to remember for a lifetime. Again, thank you for providing me with this life-changing opportunity.

Riley Backus

Clifton Springs, NY