

Comments at the 70th Anniversary of the Orinda Rotary Club

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Tiffany Eng

Good evening and thank you President John Donnelly for inviting me here tonight to share my Rotary story.

Growing up here in Orinda, my family hosted several foreign exchange students in our home over the years. Through this experience I also befriended many of the other foreign exchange student in town. Orinda's a pretty small place, so by the time I got to highschool, making new friends from faraway lands was a refreshing change of pace.

In the early 90's, I was a high school senior at Miramonte and our family hosted Lorena Allemandi, a Rotary Exchange student my age from Argentina, who was sponsored by the Orinda Rotary. This is when I first learned about the Rotary Youth Exchange Program.

If you're not familiar with this program, it aligns with Rotary's commitment to empowering youth through leadership programs. Youth Exchange students live for a few months in another country, or a whole year. Exchange students live with families, attend school, and discover a whole new culture.

As I neared graduation, I applied to colleges and was accepted to a few. But the opportunity I was most passionate about, was my application to spend a year as an exchange student before continuing my formal education. I so was excited to be accepted into the program that it hardly mattered that of all the countries in the world, I was placed in a small town in eastern Finland. I was headed to a country on the edges of Europe, with the darkest and coldest winter and one of the hardest languages to learn.

By all accounts, my year abroad was an incredible experience and successful adventure. I gained a new appreciation for being the “outsider” after growing up in Orinda my whole life. I learned how it feels to look different and sound different from everyone around me, and how to manage expectations about who I was and what life was really like in California and the states.

I tried new things - like mushroom hunting, ice fishing, sauna and winter camping and developed lifelong friendships. I built an unbreakable bond to another corner of the world, and gained an extended family of host parents and siblings. I even attempted to learn the language. In fact, in preparing for tonight, I found the speech I gave at the last Rotary meeting I attended and I wanted to share my final thoughts with you...in Finnish. Here goes...

Olen ollut täällä kymmenen kuukautta ja se on ollut ihana. minulla on saanut hyviä suomalaisia ystäviä ja ulkomalaisiakin ja mulla on hyviä muistioja. tykkän saunasta karjalan pirakkasta, marjoista, metsasta, ja Rotari luonaista. Joensuu on myös turvallinen, kaunis, ja siisti paikka. On ollut vähän kylmä, mutta olen totanut siihen. olen kaynyt Lapissa, turussa, Helsingissa, peiterissa ja koko pohjois-Karjalassa. Sanoisin sinulle herra presidentti ja hyvät rotarilaiset , kiitoksia kaikesta. Joensuu ja Suomi tulee aina olemaan sydämessäni.

*I've been in this 10 months and it has been wonderful. I have got good Finnish friends and foreigners and I have good memories. I like the sauna from the Karelian pie, the berries, the forest, and the Rotari visits. Joensuu is also a safe, beautiful, and neat place. There has been a little cold, but I'm used to it. I have been a guest in Lapland, Turku, Helsinki, St. Petersburg and the entire northern Karelia. I would say to you, Mr President and good Rotarians, thank you for everything. Joensuu and Finland will always be in my heart.*

It's been over 25 years since I was last in Finland. Looking back, I can see how that one year has influenced who I've become. I returned to the states and went to college in Minnesota, because after Finland, the how bad could the Minnesotan winter really be? I majored in sociology and anthropology because I knew I enjoyed learning about different cultures. In college I studied abroad again, this time in rural China. After living in Finland, I figured, I could adapt to anything. There, I started learning Chinese, because after studying Finnish, I figured, Chinese couldn't be that hard.

After college, I didn't join the workforce just yet. After spending a gap year in Finland before college, I knew I wouldn't regret taking a year "off" to volunteer with the AmeriCorps VISTA program - which is like a domestic Peace Corps program. I worked in Oakland Chinatown at a non-profit where I later met my husband. I eventually attended UC Berkeley - where I studied City planning, community development and housing. For the past 20 years, I've worked in non-profits, promoting, building and advocating for affordable housing.

These days, my husband Ener and I are busy working and raising our two young daughters in Oakland. And while they are still too young to be an exchange student, they are attending a mandarin immersion school in Oakland and their Chinese fluency is probably better than my Finnish and Chinese and French language skills put together. I hope someday soon, we can pay it forward and host an exchange student in our home.

My year in Finland seems like a long time ago. Back then, there was no skype for long distance calls, no youtube or google, or email.

The world has become a lot smaller since 1993, thanks in part to technology. This past week I strolled down memory lane and visited my finnish high school, the library, and the homes where I spent so much time

- all on Google 'street view'. I caught up with old friends from that year on Facebook, and I even used Google to translate my speech to the Finnish Rotary so I could remember what I had written.

And even though things seem closer, some cultural and social divides seem to be growing deeper. These days, I'm even more grateful for programs like the Youth Exchange Program and all the good work and service of the Rotary Club and each of you here, that promote goodwill and better friendships and foster cross-cultural understanding, student to student, family to family, Rotary club to Rotary club, district to district, country to country.

I'd like to thank my parents for instilling an appreciation and curiosity for worlds beyond our borders, and I'd like to thank the Orinda Rotary, all of you and District 5160 for sponsoring me and all the other exchange students that of come and gone over the years. I'm forever grateful for the opportunity to live in Finland and honored to be invited to share my story tonight.

For me, my year abroad is a reminder that it's not that hard to build a better world and learn to celebrate our differences and our common humanity. We can all take part, whether as a host, a traveler, or by simply being a good neighbor. We all have a role to play, and we all can make a positive difference, one exchange at a time.

*Bio:*

*Tiffany graduated from Miramonte High School in 1992 and spent the year after high school in Finland through the Youth Exchange Program. She went on to Carleton College where she studies Sociology and Anthropology. She also received her Masters in City and Regional Planning from UC Berkeley, where she studied Housing and Community Development. She currently work for Grounded Solutions Network, a national affordable housing membership organization that focuses on*

*affordable housing policy. Tiffany lives in Oakland with her husband Ener Chiu and their two daughters, where she is an active volunteer in support of Oakland parks, families and neighborhoods.*