

Hi, I'm Jessye Campbell.

[A 3-min video was shown of Jessye before she left, outlining the reasons why she wanted to live for a year overseas on a Rotary International Student Exchange.]

[Her presentation was accompanied by a slideshow of photos from her year in Europe.]

That was me 2 years ago at the Variety Board of Directors' Christmas Function!

I'm now 18 years old and I'm a year 12 student at Brighton Secondary School here in Adelaide. I participated in the special interest music program and the Think Bright program, which encourages creative and critical thinking, from years 8-10. I was also part of the debating team and several school musical ensembles.

I became blind at the age of 5 when both of my eyes were removed due to retinoblastoma – that is, tumours in the eyes. Throughout most of my primary school years I attended mainstream school just outside of Adelaide, with just one day a week at the SA School for Vision Impaired, mainly for braille, O&M and assistive technology lessons. From the beginning of year 6 when my family moved closer to Adelaide I spent more time at SASVI each week but was also enrolled at my new local mainstream school one day a week. This was very important to me – ie. to stay involved in mainstream schooling as well.

I've never really felt that being blind was going to stop me from doing what I wanted to do and today I want to tell you about my experience of living in France for year 11 for a full 12 months on a Rotary International Student Exchange. Hopefully this might encourage a few people to inspire their students to at least think about the possibility of studying overseas.

The benefits of studying abroad are vast and varied. You can experience a different way of living to your own, meet new people, gain a level of independence away from the people you usually rely on to do things for you. You can learn a new language and learn how to fit into a family dynamic that may be completely different to your own. All of these are useful, if not essential skills needed to become a fully functional, adaptable adult.

Unfortunately, the number of Australian students that go on international exchange dwindles further and further each year, whether it's because the student wants to get high school out of the way first, or because of money concerns or because Mum worries that her baby won't be properly taken care of overseas! Happily, there are solutions to all of these problems, which we will come to later.

I left for France in January 2018 and returned home last January. I had done three years of school French at this point but I'd never really thought of doing an exchange as no-one was promoting the programs and no-one I knew had done one, and certainly not for longer than 6 months. The idea started when I attended a careers day exhibition with my school just a few months earlier. Two support staff came with me that day to tell me what the different stalls were so that I could choose which ones I wanted to visit and find out more about. There was one stall for the

Southern Cross Cultural Exchange, which was promoting student exchanges abroad. Interestingly, no-one mentioned this stall to me, probably thinking it wouldn't apply to me. Luckily, however, my mother dropped in on the event later in the day and spoke to the people running that stall. She told me about it that evening and the more we considered it, the more we thought, "Hey – why not?"

So my family and I started looking around for different foreign cultural exchange companies and ended up settling on Rotary because of the fantastic support network they offer, having councillors in both the host and home countries if any problems arise. In the Rotary program, you are hosted by a Rotary Club overseas and you change host families every three to four months, both to make it easier on the families and to give the exchange student a really good idea of the true culture of a country as every family is slightly different and you can never really take what one family does to mean everyone in their country does the same.

So, when I arrived with my first host family I was thrown straight away into speaking French. Now, I thought I was pretty good at French, being one of the top students in my classes, but when I arrived they were speaking so quickly and with vocabulary I had never heard that I was completely lost. Usually to teach someone a new language you point at things and say, "chair, book" whatever it may be, but of course this wasn't going to work too well with me so I was very glad I had at least the basics of French before I went. Within around three weeks I could listen and understand normal conversations at maybe 90% of their usual speed pretty well and by three months I could put phrases together and speak without too much hesitation. But I didn't really feel comfortable with the language until after six months. Then I could understand my teachers at school, talk without having to work out the words first in my head, and enjoy life a lot more now that I wasn't constantly worrying about how to say what I was thinking.

This is the benefit of going on exchange for more than 6 months. Yes, going for any amount of time is great, but if it's any shorter than that, you are just starting to feel comfortable with the language and then you have to start thinking about packing up and leaving and saying all your goodbyes, whereas if you stay for longer than 6 months, once you have the language down, you can relax, enjoy the new experiences and really consolidate the language so you don't forget it as soon as you get on the plane back home.

Before I was accepted onto the Rotary Exchange program I was interviewed by several Rotary members and previous exchange students to ensure I was dedicated enough, resilient enough and a suitable ambassador for Australia to go on exchange. As it was pointed out to me, while you're overseas your behaviour and character reflect back on your whole country so they want to make sure you're a good fit for the program.

My Mum then wrote to the Education Department to ask if the funding my school receives here for me could be transferred to my school in France. I have to say, we didn't really expect them to agree to that, but, amazingly they did and so they actually made the full funding available to my French school to use in support of me, though, sadly, my school never found the occasion to use any of it. I also had an issue when I was unable to get the NDIS to help me fund a BrailleNote to take with me. So again, we wrote to the education department and, incredibly, they provided me with a new BrailleNote Touch (that's a braille laptop with a screen attached) to take to France

which was extremely useful, not only to do my work on but having the screen to show my teachers, making what I was doing not too unfamiliar and scary for them.

The outward journey to France was certainly an experience. Everyone going on exchange from Australia to lots of different countries all left on the same day and so we all met up at Melbourne airport to travel together. There were only 7 of us travelling from South Australia to Melbourne, then about 40 students, keep in mind, this is from the whole of Australia, and 2 adults left Melbourne airport for Singapore. We had a very quick turnaround before 10 of us left for Paris and on arrival we said goodbye to our chaperone. The last leg of the journey was just me and one other girl (from Melbourne) on a one hour flight to Nantes where we were each met by our first host families. For me it was another hour's journey south to my town, La Roche-Sur-Yon in Western France, and I was immediately plunged straight into having to communicate only in French after a 38 hour journey and barely any sleep! That was a little daunting but my host father, the one who came to pick me up, was very excited and immediately started jabbering away about his home and his family on the drive home. My very first full phrase, after much consideration and carefully picking out the words was, "it's strange to be sitting on the other side of the car". I was so proud!!

My first family was very ... dynamic. They were quite young parents - not quite 40 - and had 7 children from the ages of 3-20, all living at home. Playing with the younger kids was very good for my language learning at the beginning, particularly when we played games with little models of animals and such. I very quickly learned the words for to win, to lose, and how to say "your turn" and "my turn?" Luckily, I knew a little French already so as long as they spoke very slowly and ran through a long list of synonyms to find one I would understand, we could at least make ourselves semi-understood.

The school I went to was a Lycee, which means it was for senior high school students in Grades 10-12, and it was Catholic - which didn't really make much difference apart from the quality of the food and the fact that there was a cross on the wall in each classroom, which I didn't realise until about 8 months in! They'd never had a vision impaired student at their school before. Emails from the school had told us that the students were excited about me coming and had already had a workshop where they practised trying to find their way around the school with their eyes covered over in order to imagine what it would be like! It was enlightening for them, apparently, and made many students eager to take it in turns to guide me around!

I knew that the teachers wouldn't really know how to deal with me in the classroom but I assured them that with my BrailleNote, as long as the teachers could provide documents on a USB in word format, we could pass my work back and forth. Of course, French braille has totally different contractions to UEB braille, but one excellent feature of the BrailleNote is that you can switch quite easily between several different braille codes. So before I left for France, I ensured I'd set up the options for UEB, grade one French, and even grade 2 French was readily available if I started feeling cocky about my French reading ability. (I can tell you, that didn't happen very often, haha!)

I was with the same group of students for all my classes and they immediately took me under their wing. It may have helped that it was the international class which meant we had some of

our classes in English half the time and there were generally one or two international students in the class. They helped me get around the school as it was set up very badly for a cane user, and at lunchtimes. At lunch in France, everyone goes into the cafeteria, we lined up, got a tray and then selected what we wanted from a huge spread of food on offer. We then sat down around a table with knives and forks and ate a full 3 course hot meal together while chatting. It was very different to lunchtimes here. I usually went with one friend or another and they quickly ran through the options so that I could choose what I wanted.

That was all great, but my favourite parts of that year were, of course, the holidays. I went to the Basque region of France and Spain with one family, Paris with another, the Pyrenees at Halloween, but one of my favourites was when I stayed for 3 weeks in the summer holidays with a rather well-off family who just happened to have a light airplane in their back yard, so of course I had to try my hand at flying it. Very excitingly, I got to be a co-pilot and even briefly take the controls on several flights! Living in a gated community with a private airstrip, my host father had some friends with some pretty fun toys so I also got to try out, with my mother's permission I should add, a gyro copter, glider and jetski. That was a fun three weeks.

But I think my favourite time of all was going on the Eurotour with the rest of the Rotary students in my region. We visited 6 countries in 12 days on a bus with 50 exchange students from 17 different countries. We visited France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, Italy and Switzerland. Of course, I needed quite a bit of help on this trip so the district chairperson put out an email to all the students saying the first 12 students to respond would each be my buddy for one day of the trip. She was inundated with responses from students eager to help out!

In each city we had a guided tour then had a few hours to explore on our own with a meeting place and time for a rendez-vous. As you can imagine, at times it was difficult to keep everyone together while moving through an unfamiliar city, but this is when we discovered the perfect way to keep all the Latinos with the group. All the leader had to do was hold a speaker above his head playing some Latino music and there would be a long line of dancing Brazilians and Argentinians following along behind. Turn off the music and they would scatter. Turn it back on and there they would be, dancing along like rats after the pied piper. It was very entertaining.

There is much more I could tell you, of course, about my fabulous year away. But time is short, and I want also to reflect a little upon why more students aren't keen to try a taste of life in another part of the world when the opportunity – through these longstanding, tried-and-tested student programs – is right there for the taking.

I think most students these days just want to get high school over as quickly as possible, either because they want to go on to higher education or because they hate school and want it to be finished already, and they wouldn't want this exchange to delay that in any way. Luckily, however, there is no reason why an exchange has to delay your schooling. As long as I passed the classes at my French school and met the mandatory requirements for my Year 11 school certificate, two semesters of English and one of Maths, I had the option to come back from my exchange and go straight into year 12 rather than repeating year 11. However, I chose to repeat year 11 because I'm not particularly worried about extending my time at school. I didn't want to miss out on all the learning done in year 11, especially as jumping straight to year 12 after

arriving home would only increase the already daunting pressure, but I was the only Australian doing the Rotary Exchange who chose that option last year as far as I know. As it turned out, all the credits I earned from my year away came in handy, in fact, as I ended up being off school sick for most of last year!

And even if you did have to extend by one year, can you imagine the benefits later on in life? For example, most future employers are a bit wary about hiring a vision impaired person because they think we might need extra assistance or we might hurt ourselves, but if you can show them your resumé and say, "I went to the other side of the world on my own for this many months. I was perfectly fine and made adaptations where necessary so I could fit in, and look how many skills I came back with," do you think they might reconsider? I sure hope so, or I'm sunk.

Now, to calm any anxious parents, worried about sending their child halfway across the world, the students are all very well looked after. I was always staying with a family so they had duty of care most of the time and the same applied for when I was at school. But I wasn't relegated to home and school. As long as I negotiated with my host family and let them know where I was, I could go out with my friends, go to parties or even travel if I wanted. Near the end of the year when I had a better grasp of the language I took a train from my town to Paris on my own, that was about three hours, to meet my mother and brother who had come to visit for 5 days on their way to the UK, had a wonderful time, got my phone pickpocketed at Notre Dame and then took the train back home. It's all part of gaining experience, right?

Before I went away, some of my support staff were not really in agreement with me going because they felt I didn't have the skills I needed to take care of myself, cooking, cleaning and the like. But this is one of the reasons that I wanted to go. I wanted to learn those skills and it's much easier to do that when you are out of your comfort zone. When staying with the families I often helped to cook dinner which involved shopping for the groceries, handling sharp knives and hot stove tops, and I learned a lot that way. I also helped out around the house when I could, loading the dishwasher, folding clothes and clearing up after the little kids. My O&M skills for city travel increased when I learned a few routes around town, and my social skills improved when I went out to lunch or shopping with my friends, let alone constantly meeting new people and having to make a whole new set of friends. So, not only are you well taken care of, but I learned some of the essential living skills I had been lacking up to this point.

In fact, over the year I stayed with seven different families with what added up to eighteen brothers and sisters. On top of that I made friends at school, both French friends and international friends, and of course on my Rotary weekends I met people from 5 continents of the earth. From them I have learned new cultures, new languages and new ways of looking at life that I would never have experienced if I had stayed at home instead. I now know how to say hello in Portuguese, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Finnish and Indian which I think is not bad – for my first year of travelling!

Going on exchange can be expensive but there are myriad ways to overcome this hurdle. Charities such as Lions and Kiwanis are only too happy to chip in to assist in a cause such as this. There are also private trusts and grants available and Variety gives generous assistance for academic ventures. Also, when put in perspective, the expense is really not that bad. You might

pay \$3000 for your kid to go on a school ski trip for one week and yet balk at the idea of 9 or 10 thousand for a whole year which includes accommodation, food, schooling and even a guide around town if you're lucky. I presented my intentions to a few organisations and had no trouble getting the full cost for the year covered. I am extremely grateful to those organisations for their invaluable support.

The benefits of this experience do not stop when you return home, they keep on coming and enriching your life. I now have a network of friends from all around the world. As a result, I had support from all over when I was in hospital so much last year. I was also invited to present at the Annual Rotary Conference in Broken Hill, Outback Australia in April about myself and my experiences in France, which was great experience for me. In December I was awarded the Paul Harris Fellowship - a special Rotary International honour in recognition of overcoming my challenges and being a good ambassador for Australia.

Others have also benefitted along the way in different ways from my participation in this program. So the more of us who are out there giving it a go, the better. It is essential that society at large sees those of us with disabilities as capable, valuable participants in the world's affairs, taking on and meeting challenges of all varieties. We need to prove to the world that we do have skills, strengths and experiences that are well suited to the FULL RANGE of different jobs and professions out there, not only the jobs that are disability-related.

The biggest single piece of advice that was given to us students before we left home was to ALWAYS SAY YES when invited along to something, even if you didn't really want to – because you never knew what it might lead to.

I also believe that when an idea grabs you and inspires you, you should say YES to it, believe in it, commit to it, and THEN worry about how, where and when! After all, that's just logistics. The vision and energy you have will propel it along and will attract the support you need.

I just hope therefore, if you have the opportunity, that you will encourage other VI students in high schools to step out, in whatever way they can, beyond their comfort zones and surprise themselves, their families, and others with what they can achieve.

Thank you

I am happy to take any questions for the remainder of the time.....and will be around for the rest of the Conference.