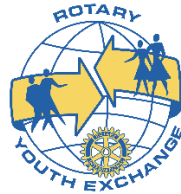


The Provisional Rotary Club of Beijing

Hosted the First Student Exchange in 2004

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Anna Kennedy arrived in the People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國) in January 2004 unsure of what to expect. Two months later, the exchange student from Gawler, Australia, departed for home with memories of a vibrant, friendly, country she intended to visit.

"I am a very curious person, and I wanted to know more about [China's] unique culture," said Kennedy. "I study Chinese at school, and I wanted to deepen my understanding." She visited the country as part of Rotary's Youth Exchange program. This is a student exchange program for secondary school students of ages 15-19. Since 1929, Rotary International has sent young people around the globe to experience new cultures. Currently, about 9,000 students are sponsored by Rotary Clubs every year. Typically, students are sent to another country for a year-long stay, generally living with multiple host families during the year, and are expected to perform daily tasks within the household as well as attend school in the host country. However, Anna Kennedy was the first to travel to Beijing though in a short-term.

The Rotary Club of Gawler Light sponsored Kennedy's short-term exchange, and the 49-member of multi-nationalities Provisional Rotary Club of Beijing (北京扶輪社) hosted her. While in China, the 16-year-old girl worked to improve her language skills, quickly discovering that the everyday Chinese spoken in Beijing is quite different than the version she studied for five years in Australia. She also visited major tourist sites, such as the Forbidden City (紫禁城) and the Great Wall of China (長城), and made dozens of new friends.

"I learned much more about myself and how to talk to people," said Kennedy, who stayed in the homes of Beijing Rotary Club members Deidre Fischer (黛珠) and Regula Hwang-Ma (黃曉蕾), as well as with two non-Rotarian host families. "I feel so much more mature and independent since I have been to China. I always used to be scared of introducing myself to strangers, but now it doesn't faze me." Kennedy, a top student at Trinity College, the secondary school she attended at Gawler, said that she particularly enjoyed friendships she formed at Beijing BISS International School, where she attended classes.

“Anna was very flexible and adjusted very quickly,” said Rotarian Fischer, the deputy principal at the school. “She was willing to share and willing to soak up and try new adventures.” Fischer, who as a teenager visited Denmark through Youth Exchange, encouraged the Beijing Rotary Club to participate as soon it received permission to take part in Rotary International programs in late 2002.

“Many people have misconceptions about China,” said Fischer. “I think that one of the major benefits to the exchange students coming to China is that they can learn more about the Chinese people and the country itself.” She added that she thought that by providing an opportunity to interact with many different people in an unfamiliar country, Youth Exchange helps students develop new perspectives.

Beijing student Dawn Lo, who traveled to Gawler in June the same year, was eager to learn all she could about a new culture during the Exchange. “I am most looking forward to sharing the Chinese culture with the people I will meet, but I’m [also interested in] seeing how they live their lives and what their culture is like,” Lo said before she left for her two-month visit. The 15-year-old, who was born in Canada but has lived in China for the past 10 years, stood to benefit from Rotarian hosts with several years of experience opening their homes to exchange students.

The 32-member Gawler Light Rotary Club has participated in Youth Exchange since 1996, its charter year, annually hosting one incoming student and sponsoring one outgoing student. According to Past District Governor Dick Milner, Gawler Light Rotarians decided to expand their involvement in the program in 2004 because of the unique opportunity to partner with China. Milner worked with Fischer, a former Gawler Light Rotarian, to bring the two clubs together.

Although Youth Exchange was new to most of the Beijing Rotarians, they were eager to get involved. Many took Kennedy for day trips and invited her to join in the Lunar New Year celebrations, which took place during her first month there. According to Fischer, the success of Kennedy’s visit prompted many members to volunteer to host the next student.

“It’s an excellent way to promote international peace and understanding,” she said. “It is by understanding each other that we can find ways to work together.”

