



Pictured at a gathering of the International Youth Exchange Program of the Unitarian Universalist congregations of Croton-on-Hudson and Hastings-on-Hudson, from left: Anne Gauss, Ida Roemheld, Laura Droesch, Emma Kates-Shaw, Ariel Islam, Michael Foertsch, Gabriel Kates-Shaw, Elijah Lewis and Josh Lewis. Ida and Lauren were exchange students from Germany. (Anne, a friend of the Shaw family, is from Germany but was not an exchange student--she happened to be visiting relatives in Westchester.) Michael is a friend of Ariel. Emma, Ariel, Joh and Elijah and former exchange students and Gabriel is Emma's brother.

Unitarian Youth Exchange Program, begun in Croton, marks 5th successful year

The Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations in Croton-on-Hudson and Hastings-on-Hudson have just completed the fifth year of a youth exchange program started in Croton with the return from Germany on Saturday, August 31 of Josh Lewis, a senior at Mahopac High School and member of the Unitarian congregation in Croton.

Josh's older brother, Elijah Lewis, who has completed a year at SUNY Plattsburg, participated in the program four summers ago and his family has hosted UU youth from Europe.

The program, the brainchild of Croton resident Shahan Islam, who had served for many years as a board member of the Unitarian Fellowship in Croton--has been connecting local Unitarian youth and families with Unitarian youth and families in Germany and France, he says. "This year, there was extensive involvement and help by the directors of religious education of the Hastings and Croton congregations, John Cavallero and Jane Podell respectively."

The program costs participants no money (other than own airfare and spending money); the host families provide lodging, meals, local transportation and include the guests in daily activities and UU activities as available," Mr. Islam explains.

He says that a unique aspect of the exchange program is that the American youth have at least some basic instruction (at least 20 hours) in the main language of the country where the youth will be going. "Typically, most European families speak English at least reasonably well. However, it is very strongly believed that in order to obtain the greatest benefit and have a more meaningful exchange experience, the host families should try to speak to the youth in the family's native language to the extent possible. For this reason, for the American youth, some basic instruction in the main language of the country where the youth will be going is mandatory."

This summer families from

Unitarian congregations in Croton, Hastings and New Haven, Conn. hosted youth from Germany. Two of the youth, Laura Droesch of Wurzburg, Germany and Ida Roemheld of Stuttgart, Germany, also managed to visit Washington, D.C. and Montreal, Canada with their host families and all three congregations. Laura and Ida were strongly encouraged to apply to the program by Kim and Finn Stolle of Hamburg, Germany, who had previously participated in the program.

The program has been such a positive experience for the families that many of the youth have crossed the Atlantic again after their exchange period, cementing the lifelong relationships created with the host families and friends during the exchange period, according to Mr. Islam.

"Similarly, hosts have also opted to host again and the American youth who have participated have frequently gotten together to share their experiences," he says.

One such gathering this summer was at the home of Betsy Kates of Ossining, a Hastings congregant, who hosted Ida and Laura for part of the summer. Betsy's daughter, Emma Kates-Shaw, a freshman at Swarthmore College, participated in the program three summers ago with Ariel Islam of Croton, now a junior at New York University—and Mr. Islam's daughter--spending part of their exchange period in France and Spain.

Ariel is currently in Madrid as part of NYU's Global Liberal Studies program and credits the program with helping her develop an international outlook which has followed into her academic studies.

"As far as the numbers go, there are not a lot of Unitarians and the number decreases greatly when one travels to Europe," notes Mr. Islam, "so I get great satisfaction at helping the Unitarian youth and families make the strong bonds and possibly even broaden their outlook and experiences with the travel abroad."