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Looking back on the last 6 months of my life is crazy. In such a short period of time I have experienced, learned, changed, gained, lost and grown so much. The person I was before arriving in Brasil is so different from who I am now, and I'm sure the person I will be 6 months from now, when I return, will be different as well. It is still just sinking in that all this is real, that this isn't a dream but in fact my life. The amazing life of a rotary exchange student!

Back in September of 2014 I decided to apply for a long term rotary exchange, not fully expecting to be picked. There was this idea in my mind that rotary exchanges were for the teens who will one day join United Nations, or invent a cure for cancer, or something like that. Here I was, just a kid who didn't know what she wanted to do after high school and thought that living abroad would be unbelievably incredible. Nevertheless, I went for it. Why not? Looking back I'm so glad that I applied, and realize that all rotary is looking for in exchange students are people who want to see the world.

Fast forward 11 months, a few teary goodbyes, and a mountain of completed visa paperwork, it's August, 2015. I have arrived in Brazil! The reality of the whole program didn't actually set in until that first night. What had I done? I wasn't going to see my family for a year, I wasn't going to be able to hang out with my friends, go skiing or mountain biking, or be a part of any of the clubs I was involved with. Why had I completely abandoned my entire life! What I soon realized however, was that I was going to build a whole new life here, and that's incredible.

I am living in a city of a little over 110 000 people called Barretos, in the state of São Paulo, Southeastern Brazil. Upon learning this I was unsure of what to expect, I knew almost nothing about Brazil. I arrived with all the typical stereotypes (nice beaches, beautiful people, great soccer players, best parties) as well as basic knowledge about my town, an inland city known for hosting the 2nd biggest country party in the world. So far, everything has exceeded expectations. It's true, Brazil does have an amazing coastline and Brazilians do love soccer, host the best parties ever, and beautiful are people, but Brazil is so much more than that. My city is so different from than I expected. When I heard the words "country" in relation to the city I assumed something like Calgary, but Brazilian Country is not the same as Canadian Country, not at all. I am so impressed by the people, lifestyle, and amazing culture I am immersed in daily.

Something I have realized is that it's extremely difficult to explain what it's like to be an exchange student. How could I possibly begin to describe how challenging it is dropping into the middle of a new community half way across the world with absolutely nobody you know there with you? What it is like trying to participate in high school classes in a language you don't know? Trying to connect with people who you can barely communicate with and are so culturally different from? To realize that you have left your entire life - family, friends, clubs and sports, community, everything - and won't return for almost a year? At the same time, how do I explain how amazing it when your host family and city start to feel like home? When you realize you actually understand the Portuguese telenovela you're watching, or the joke your friend just told you? How can you understand what it's like to realize that you have built a whole life, complete with amazing friends, after school activities, and even Sundays devoted to lunch with your host grandma, from absolutely nothing? How can you understand the amazing moment

when you realize that what was once all so strange and foreign is now simply home? The best I can do is say it's an amazing, unique experience that has forever altered the way I view myself and the world.

The memories I created in this beautiful country I will cherish forever. From learning Brazilian card games and song lyrics with my friends, to trying new dishes and candies, to festivals and new cultural events, to travelling, everyday I learn, experience, or do something new. In a short 6 months Brazil has managed to capture my heart with its people, culture, food, and especially the way it has changed who I am and my perspective on life.

When I left, I was certain that the hardest part of my exchange would be saying goodbye to everyone in my life, and knowing that I would no longer be there with them through everything they experienced this year. Now I see that was the easy part. I knew I was coming back, it's only a year. Now I realize the hardest part will be saying goodbye to Brazil. My family, my friends, my entire life that I have created, leaving all this won't just be for a year. In July this incredible, life changing journey is over, and who knows when I will return, if I will have an opportunity to return? I'm still in denial that I will eventually be packing my bags and saying goodbye to everything this year has brought. All in all though, I guess if the worst part of an exchange is coming home, you know that it was a worthwhile experience!