

## 2025 ASSE/WH Grants Scholarship Conference: Celebrating Impact, Inspiring Action

By Grants Program Team Members

Each year, the ASSE/World Heritage Grants Scholarship Conference brings together our Area Representatives, Area Coordinators, scholarship students, and partners for an energizing weekend of training, inspiration, and connection. The 2025 conference took place in beautiful San Diego, California.

More than just a professional development event, the conference is a celebration of our shared mission. Months in the making, it unites returning and new team members with representatives from American Councils, the U.S. Department of State, and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA).

The heart of the event is always the students. Selected through rigorous competition, FLEX and YES students share their powerful stories of personal growth, cultural exchange, and the life-changing impact of their experience.

Field staff gain insights from peers and learn firsthand how these students enrich their host communities. ECA and American Councils representatives provide valuable program context, tips, and space for open dialogue. Feedback consistently ranks this as a favorite conference—thanks to the inspiring voices of our students.

A highlight of the event is the participation of our outstanding scholarship students. Nominated by their Area Representatives and Area Coordinators, and selected by the Grants Program team, these students reflect the very best of our program. This year, we were honored to welcome these eight exceptional young people as youth ambassadors:



• **Zhamila Omorova, Kyrgyzstan** – An active volunteer with more than 100 service hours, known for her cultural presentations and community spirit.

• **Dusan Stojanovic, Serbia** – Proud of his heritage, with 80+ hours of volunteer work, known for his outgoing personality and infectious enthusiasm.

• **Ana Makatsaria, Georgia** – Resilient and committed, even after displacement due to natural disaster.

• **Temur Nurimov, Uzbekistan** – A peer leader who has embraced sports, taught coding, and shared his culture with openness and drive.

• **Iskra Georgievska, Macedonia** – Deeply involved in the arts, teaching dance, and participating in cultural presentations.

• **Bagila Yessirkepova, Kazakhstan** – Always positive and proactive, who helped recruit a host family during her very first week.

• **Mihai Todoroscean, Moldova** – A standout scholar and volunteer who proudly promotes his culture while leading community projects.

• **Oleksandr Hladkyi, Ukraine** – A dedicated volunteer and a lover of literature and Ukrainian poetry.

Together, with the support of our team and partners, we continue to empower young leaders and build bridges between nations. Let's keep the momentum going—connecting hearts, and cultures across the globe.

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## Bowls of Hope: Samuel's Sweet Success Story

How do you give back to a community that takes you in with open arms? That's the question Hungarian FLEX Scholarship exchange student Samuel Szalma asked himself during his year in Canton Township, Michigan. His answer? Cereal. Lots and lots of cereal.

Samuel, who recently graduated from Plymouth High School in Canton, is an enthusiastic local volunteer. Last spring, he decided to organize a cereal drive for one of his favorite places to give back: Hope Clinic in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Known for providing food and medical care to those in need, the clinic was often short on one much-loved pantry item—boxed cereal.

And so, the Bowls of Hope Cereal Drive was born. Samuel set up collection baskets at the Canton Township Office, the Canton Public Library, and Summit on the Park. He hoped to collect 200 boxes of cereal. Thanks to the generosity of the Canton community, he didn't just meet that goal—he beat it! A total of 201 boxes were donated, each one a small act of kindness with a big impact.

Samuel credits his host mom, Brenda Vaishnav, with helping him develop the idea and chauffeuring him from donation point to donation point. He was also grateful to everyone who helped make the drive a success—from those who offered advice and logistical support to those who provided space for donation bins and helped manage the collections. Most of all, he thanks the people of Canton for showing up with open hearts and full carts.

And of course, a heart-felt thanks goes to Hope Clinic—for not only providing essential services to those in need, but also giving volunteers like our Flex Scholarship exchange student Samuel a place to belong. Turns out, a little cereal can go a long way...



### Editor's Box

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who has contributed articles and photos to ASSE News! Your submissions make this newsletter possible. We'd love to hear from you—whether you're a student, host family, or Area Representative. Share your experiences, and you might be featured in an upcoming issue or on our ASSE/World Heritage social media channels. Don't have the time or desire to write an article but still want to share something exciting? No problem! Just email or call us with your news, and we'll take it from there. Photos are encouraged to be sent by email to [sgreer@asse.com](mailto:sgreer@asse.com).

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Looking forward to hearing from you!  
Until next edition, Sonia Greer, ASSE/World Heritage News Editor

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# Host Family Spotlight: The International House of Locke and Love

James and Audra Locke know better than most how hosting an exchange student can change your life. Over the years, they’ve opened their home—and their hearts—to 16 students from 15 different countries. Each young person left a lasting imprint, becoming part of a growing global family.

Audra’s journey with ASSE has mirrored that same spirit of connection. What began as the role of host mom evolved into Area Representative, and now, Area Coordinator for Texas in ASSE’s Western Region—roles through which she has supported countless students and local Area Representatives with dedication and heart.

This spring, the Lockes took their commitment one step further. When the opportunity arose to surprise their former exchange student Ricards Berzins in Latvia for his birthday, they didn’t hesitate. Packing their bags—and a smoked Texas brisket—they embarked on a 20-hour journey across the globe.

Arriving in Latvia, they went straight to Ricards’ home. The look of surprise and joy on his face was a moment they’ll always treasure. The week that followed was filled with unforgettable experiences: exploring the vibrant cobblestone streets of Old Town Riga, venturing underground into a Soviet-era nuclear bunker, flying down an Olympic-grade bobsled track, and sampling local delicacies in markets housed inside WWI Zeppelin hangars. They even managed to share a taste of Texas in Riga’s Tex-Mex scene.



Yet, it was the simple, quiet moments that meant the most—gathered around the table with Ricards and his family, sharing meals, laughter, and stories. These were the moments that truly reflected the lifelong impact of cultural exchange.

Hosting is about more than introducing someone to American life—it’s about building bridges across oceans and generations. James and Audra’s trip to Latvia was a beautiful reminder that when you open your home with love, you also open your life to enduring friendships and adventures.

James and Audra recently said goodbye to their two 2024-25 students—Luka from Georgia and Yi Wen “Brian” from Taiwan, but they’re already looking forward to welcoming their next student, Maja from Poland, this August.

Thank you, Locke family, for the love and generosity you’ve shown to so many students. And a special thank you to Audra, for her continued leadership and support as our ASSE Texas Area Coordinator.



## Three Minutes of Video Magic: Exchange Stories That Stole Our Hearts

By Sam Jeziorski, ASSE/World Heritage Digital Marketing Manager

Earlier this Spring, we launched a video contest inviting our international students to share their exchange experience in a 3-minute video, and what we received was nothing short of inspiring. Over 15 students participated, each one taking the time to reflect on their journey, express their gratitude, and highlight what this experience has meant to them. From moments of culture shock to deep friendships, family dinners to school events, each video gave us a window into the personal and transformative impact of the exchange experience. It was a reminder—for all of us involved—of why we do what we do.

After much deliberation (and a lot of smiles!), we selected three winners whose stories particularly stood out. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did!



**1st Place: Azalea** (Indonesia – Huntsville, Texas)  
Azalea’s video beautifully highlighted the cultural shock she experienced and how she adapted thanks to the support of her host family and local community. Watch it here on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) and give it a thumbs up.



**3rd Place: Jeanne** (France – Riverview, Florida)  
Jeanne’s video felt like a personal scrapbook, reflecting with simplicity and warmth on her time in the U.S. Watch it here on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) and give it a thumbs up.



**2nd Place: Gunel** (Azerbaijan – Caledonia, Wisconsin)  
Gunel shared an authentic, heart-to-heart conversation with her host family, offering a touching and sincere look into their bond. Watch it here on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) and give it a thumbs up.

Each of them shared their experiences with authenticity and heart. Gunel, our second-place winner, sent us a note afterward saying: “Endless thanks for the kind gesture! It means so much to me! I also hope that our video helped encourage and inspire others! I am always trying to encourage people around me—friends, teachers—for hosting. I think it would be an amazing experience for them.” We couldn’t agree more.

To all our supporters, Area Representatives, and host families: THANK YOU. These videos are a testament to the incredible difference you make in the lives of students from around the world.

## Emma from Italy: ASSE Student in the News

We’re proud to see one of our outstanding exchange students featured in the Southern Maryland News, May 6, 2025 e-edition. Emma Agazzani, from Mantua, Italy, who just completed her exchange year in Huntingtown, Maryland, was hosted by the Higginbotham family and supported by Area Representative Kathleen McCord in the ASSE East Region. Read more about Emma’s exciting American experience in the adapted excerpts from the Southern Maryland News article below.

Unlike her hometown of Mantua — known as Italy’s “Capital of Culture” — Huntingtown has no opera house or Renaissance art galleries, but Emma embraced the

contrast. “It was something I wanted to do since I was very young,” she told the newspaper, citing “the language, the culture, the travel” as motivations for applying to ASSE back in February 2022. At 17, she has just completed her senior year at Huntingtown High School, where she immersed herself in quintessentially American experiences like cheerleading—something she described as “a dream” and nearly nonexistent in Europe—and lacrosse, a sport entirely new to her.

Emma’s academic schedule included AP English, AP Government, pre-calculus, biology, photography, and theater. Now that she is back in Italy, she plans to complete her final year of high school before heading to university, where she plans to study science and ultimately become a neurologist.

Outside the classroom, the Higginbotham family introduced her to many highlights of American culture and geography —from a Christmas parade at Disney World to swimming with dolphins, from sightseeing in New York and Atlanta to tasting her first Philly cheesesteak. In Washington, D.C., she even attended the Easter Egg Roll at the White House.

Comparing life in Calvert County to her walkable, compact hometown, Emma observed, “Here, everything is spread out and very big.” Still, she loved her time in the U.S., summing it up by saying, “I really like the school and this town.” For her host mom Danielle Higginbotham, the experience was equally meaningful: “She’s my daughter now. We’ve created a friendship, a bond.”





# CBYX Spotlight: The German Exchange Student Who Does It All

The U.S. Department of State and the German Bundestag have named Laurence Mielke, one of our World Heritage students, as the April 2025 CBYX German Participant of the Month, and once you hear his story, you'll understand why!

Hailing from the small town of Eckartsberga in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, Laurence dreamed of studying abroad for years. After scouring the internet for opportunities, he discovered the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange (CBYX) program and was immediately drawn to its emphasis on civic engagement and international understanding.

Hosted by the Adam-Fuller family in Philomath, Oregon, and supported by his World Heritage Area Representative, Barbara Neelands, Laurence has embraced American high school life with energy and enthusiasm. From acting in school theater



productions to dancing on the team and helping lead the Club of Culture, he's become a dynamic part of his host community. Not only did he help write the club's constitution, he's also organized cultural projects and spoke at a state-wide conference in Portland.

Outside of school, Laurence volunteers regularly—he's even helped clean the Oregon State University stadium multiple times! And on his birthday, he got to check a major item off his U.S. bucket list: a family trip to Seattle.

One of Laurence's biggest takeaways? A whole new attitude toward failure. "Many Americans see failure as a way to grow," he says. That perspective shift has given him newfound confidence and a boldness to try new things—and it shows in how much he's accomplished this year.

From rural Germany to meetings with Congresswoman Val Hoyle during CBYX's Civic Education Week in Washington, DC, Laurence's journey is a shining example of student diplomacy in action. And he's not slowing down yet—he plans to keep volunteering, participating, and making memories right up to his fast-approaching return flight home.

Congratulations, Laurence—you're an inspiration!



## An EGGeptional Tribute to Art, Creativity and Culture

By ASSE Host Mother Marie Darr, ASSE Midwest

This spring, I had the joy of sharing a special artistic experience with my FLEX scholarship exchange students, Kinga Winniczuk from Poland and Lusine Torikyan from Armenia. Together, we took part in the Franklin Park Mall's annual *Artistic EGGspressions* competition in Toledo, Ohio—a festive celebration of creativity where local high schools transform giant eggs into works of art.

Our team proudly represented Oak Harbor High School, where both Kinga and Lusine are enrolled. Inspired by Kinga's heritage, we chose to create a traditional Polish Easter egg design, known as *Pisanki*. These decorative eggs, rich with intricate patterns and vibrant colors, are a cherished symbol of Eastern European folk art. Under the guidance of Oak Harbor art instructor Ellie Gilbert, students collaborated to bring this cultural tradition to life, filling the egg with bold floral motifs and joyful energy.

Out of the four participating schools, Oak Harbor's egg captured the hearts of the community and received the most votes—earning a donation from Franklin Park Mall to support the girls' school's art program.

It was a proud moment not only for my two exchange students but also for the exchange community. Experiences like this remind us how valuable it is to celebrate and preserve cultural traditions. Cultural exchange isn't just about learning from each

other—it's about sharing beauty, stories, and meaning across borders. Supporting the arts in our schools creates space for that expression and connection to thrive.

Thank you, Kinga and Lusine, for your talent, creativity, and enthusiasm. And thank you to everyone who cheered their team on. It was truly a celebration of imagination, tradition, and the power of community.



## A Korean Student's Journey of Growth in the U.S.

Now back home in South Korea, ASSE alumni Jangmin Lee, one of our 2022–2023 ASSE exchange students from South Korea, is reflecting on his exchange year in the USA. He calls his year abroad "a meaningful turning point in my life."

"My decision to become an exchange student stemmed from a desire for new experiences and challenges," he writes. At Walton-Verona Independent School in Kentucky, he found "diversity and energy," adding, "working and growing alongside American students gave me the confidence that I can now take on any challenge without fear."



His host family welcomed him warmly. "They made a sincere effort to understand my culture," Jangmin says. From them, he learned "the importance of open commu-

nication and cooperation" and developed "an open-minded heart."

"Communicating with people from different backgrounds prepared me to face the future with greater confidence," he reflects. In his recent reflection, Jangmin offered some advice for future exchange students:

1. Keep an open mind – Embrace new cultures with curiosity and respect.
2. Be proactive – Get involved: join clubs and local events.
3. Focus on communication – Practice your English daily to build relationships and grow.
4. Value your host family – Connect with your host family. These bonds can last a lifetime.
5. Be thankful and let yourself grow – Learn from every moment; face challenges with patience and gratitude.

"I'm ready to face the future without fear," he concludes. "I sincerely support each one of you in your journey and wish you a truly successful and happy exchange year."

## Celebrating the Success of Our Alumni

By Salma El Yacoubi Stitz, Grants Program Director

Each time we hear about the accomplishments of our former exchange students, we are filled with immense pride. These young leaders—many of whom come from countries facing significant challenges—are shining examples of the lasting impact of the FLEX and YES Scholarship programs.

We are thrilled to share a few recent alumni achievements that reflect the heart of our mission. These three remarkable young adults used their exchange year as a

launchpad for growth, leadership, and service. Today, they continue to make a meaningful difference in their home communities, embodying the global citizenship and resilience these programs were designed to foster.

Their success is a shared achievement. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the host families who welcomed them with open arms and the dedicated Area Representatives who supported them every step of the way.

### Volunteer Excellence Award



FLEX Alumni Program  
City Representative of the Month  
for March 2025 is  
**Marius Plesca-Luncasu '24**  
from Moldova



Marius Plesca-Luncasu '24 has served as the City Representative for Balti, Moldova, for over seven months. In this time, Marius has organized impactful events that promote educational engagement, civic responsibility, and cultural exchange.

### Volunteer Excellence Award



YES Alumni Program  
City Representative of the Month  
for March 2025 is  
**Adna Korjenic '24**  
from Bosnia and Herzegovina



Adna Korjenic '24 has served as the City Representative for Sarajevo for over seven months, during which she has led impactful projects that promote volunteerism and connect her community with her exchange year experiences.

### Volunteer Excellence Award



FLEX Alumni Program  
City Representative of the Month  
for March 2025 is  
**Syuzanna Manukyan '24**  
from Armenia



Syuzanna Manukyan '24 has served as the City Representative of Martuni for over six months, during which time she has implemented many creative, community-focused projects – from FLEX program outreach across Gegharkunik province to literacy and language workshops.



# Around the World with ASSE Study Abroad

This season, our ASSE students are diving into unforgettable adventures across Europe and embracing new cultures.

In Madrid, students enjoyed soaking up the vibrant Spanish spirit. With strolls past the majestic *Puerta de Alcalá* and the elegant *Cybele Palace*, they experienced firsthand the rich history and beauty of the Spanish capital.

Over in Denmark, ASSE students have mastered living like locals—biking through charming streets, enjoying *cozy hygge* moments with their host families, and discovering the unique rhythms of Danish life. It's more than just sightseeing—it's about connection and creating bonds that transcend borders.

Meanwhile, on the sun-drenched shores of the French Riviera, students in Nice soaked in coastal views, explored historic landmarks like the *Promenade des Anglais* and *Fontaine du Soleil*, and shared delicious meals with new friends from around the globe. Each day brings a new chance to explore, learn, and grow.

These snapshots from Spain, Denmark, and France are just a glimpse of what ASSE Study Abroad offers: not just travel, but transformation. Studying abroad gives students the chance to grow in confidence, gain global perspective, and step into a bigger world. The world is their classroom—let them explore it!



## Photo Gallery



### Super Saturday Spark!

On May 17th, ASSE and World Heritage Area Representatives teamed up with their amazing exchange students to spread the joy of cultural exchange. With colorful booths, big smiles, and heartwarming stories, they lit up and inspired their communities to join the adventure!

### Prom Magic!

A timeless high school tradition and an unforgettable milestone for so many of our exchange students. It's a night full of memories they will take home forever.



### Congrats to Our Grads!

We're so proud of everything you've accomplished, every challenge you've overcome, and every moment that made this year unforgettable!

### Tears, Hugs, and Full Hearts

The hardest part of the exchange year? Saying goodbye! Yes, it is never easy, but it's a reminder of the incredible bonds formed over the past year. Thank you to the amazing host families and Area Representatives who made this journey so special for our exchange students! See you all soon!

