

Exchange students reflect on time in Ashland

by Kernan Turner for the Tidings
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Joanna Rojas Romero, left, and her brother, Patricio, have returned to Mexico after spending a year as exchange students in Ashland. Pictured with friends on a Lithia Park bridge in September are, from left, Aubrey Reynolds, Amigo Club founder Chela Tapp-Kocks, Taiga Sherman and Amigo Club President "Mina" Turner. Amigo Club photo

Two exchange students from Ashland sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, have returned home after a year of study at Ashland High School, completing an experience they have in common with eight Mexican cousins.

The students, Joanna Rojas Romero Hicks and her brother, Patricio, and their cousins are grandchildren of Joan Hicks of Guanajuato, whose sons Juan Carlos Romero Hicks and Jose Luis Romero Hicks studied at Southern Oregon University, which later added them to its Distinguished Alumni list for their career accomplishments in Mexico. They studied under the Amistad student exchange program between SOU and the University of Guanajuato.

Joanna and Patricio are the children of Dr. Patricia Romero Hicks, a sister of Juan Carlos and Jose Luis.

Joanna completed her junior year in Ashland, taking classes in subjects matching those required in Guanajuato. Patricio did the same as a freshman in Ashland.

“I really enjoyed AHS because of its different and fun sports,” Joanna wrote from Mexico in an email sent this week to the Amigo Club of Ashland. She participated in crew (rowing), golf and Nordic ski, where she saw snow for the first time.

Joanna’s host-family “parents” were Daniel and Karen Kahn, who took her to Disneyland, which she described as “one of my dreams come true. ... The family was always very supportive and taught me so many things I won’t ever forget,” Joanna said. “We shared many wonderful moments.”

Patricio stayed with Suzanne and Richard Haveman, who invited Joanna to join them in activities and trips.

Life changed for Joanna and Patricio during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I couldn’t hang out with my friends anymore and (other exchange students), who were foreigners and had to go back to their countries before the school year was over,” she said. “We took classes online with a very flexible schedule, which I liked. Although the COVID came, I had a great time and I learned about the culture. I’m glad I had the opportunity of being an exchange student, and all these memories will stay forever.”

Patricio also sent an email in which he described the first week of school as “terrifying.”

“I was a boy from another country, learning a new language, and I didn’t know now how to communicate with people of my age. Time passed, and step by step I got into a whole new world with extraordinary people who had different opinions and thoughts about life. It was so interesting to me to share my point of view with other people and back.”

When the pandemic shut down the school, he recalled, “I said to myself, ‘everything will be fine, plus we have some vacations and free time.’”

“The days passed and days became weeks, and weeks became months, and the entire city of Ashland was on lockdown,” Patricio said. “During quarantine, I felt very frustrated because I felt like I was running out of time because I knew I had to go back to Mexico and I was doing nothing. I felt like I was wasting my time in Ashland and I couldn’t do anything about it.”

“My host family always supported me in everything I did. ... It’s weird how I have to refer to them as my ‘host family.’ I feel like I have known them since forever. ... I can see them not as “host,” I just see them like my extended family,” he said.

“Now I’m back to my home country, Mexico, and I do not regret the decision of doing an exchange, because I have so many good memories and I feel like I learned a lot and that I grew as a better person.”

Amigo Club’s Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears the third Tuesday of each month. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club member.