

EXTENDED FAMILIES, EXPANDED HORIZONS

By Kaley Belval

POWER-Boise's Ben Guth has kids in Germany, Italy and South Korea. Or he kind of does. Ben and his family host high school exchange students from around the world each year as part of the Education First High School Exchange Year program.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF BEN AND NICOLE GUTH



Bluebird day.

The Guth family skiing in McCall with Yejing Ko (from South Korea), their fourth exchange student, in 2016.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BEN AND NICOLE GUTH

Day at the beach.

Clockwise from left: Philipp Zent (from Germany), Ben Guth, Ellie Guth, Francesca Veronesi (from Italy), Caden Guth and Nicole Guth on a vacation to Southern California in 2017.



To us!

Ben and Philipp having a beer together in Berlin.

While attending an orientation session at North Star Charter School in Eagle, Idaho, six years ago, Ben's wife Nicole and their daughter learned about the need for local families to host exchange students from Europe and Asia. After coming home and having a family discussion, they decided to participate. Since then, the Guths have hosted students every year – so far, two girls from South Korea, one boy and one girl from Italy, and a boy from Germany.

"It expands your understanding of the world," Ben says. "But it's also nice for your own kids to experience other cultures – it's a very interesting dynamic for our children and we think it helps broaden their understanding of the world too."

All in

Nicole became a coordinator for the program after their first year participating, and now she helps place students in homes in the Boise region. In this role, the Guths are required to take students in if things don't work out with the students' first host family.

"That's part of the process if you're a coordinator," Ben says.

Ben's family has had this happen twice, and each time, the student ended up staying with them for the remainder of the school year. Ben says hosting these kids is a huge commitment and can

be challenging at times, but the student's experience can be saved by working through the challenges and clearly communicating expectations.

"You have conflicts, just as you have with your own kids, and problems arise," Ben says. "But if you're interested in expanding your relationship while deepening your kids' backgrounds and understanding of other cultures, I think it's a really great experience."

One of the Guths' students, Philipp Zent of Germany, had a tough time with his original host family. It was a matter of personalities: Philipp, a naturally outspoken kid, was used to voicing his opinions and therefore got into disagreements with teachers and his host family, landing him in trouble. Finding the challenges too difficult, the first host family decided not to continue with the

rest of the year, and Philipp landed at the Guths'. Ben said that despite a rocky start, Philipp turned out to be a great kid who had a wonderful experience in the U.S.

"Once we got to know Philipp, we absolutely fell in love with him and he's definitely a part of our family," says Ben. "We'd planned for him to visit us this summer and we went to visit his family last summer. He's a great kid that's got a super big heart."

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PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BEN AND NICOLE GUTH

Visiting Italian vistas.

(left) Francesca, her mother, Annalisa, and brother Marco with the Guths in Bologna, Italy on top of San Lucia Sanctuary during a June 2019 summer vacation. The group trekked a few miles to the sanctuary at the top of the hill where this picture was taken. It was a very hot, but beautiful, day—and what a view!

Sunshine in the square.

(below) Philipp, Nicole, Caden, Ellie, and Ben at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany during a June 2019 summer vacation.

Fun with old friends

Ben and his family stay in touch with most of their former exchange students. In addition to visiting Philipp last year, the Guths also visited Francesca Veronesi, a young woman from Italy who stayed with them. And when Ben had a project in Guam with a layover day in South Korea, he got in contact with Yuna Shin, the first student they hosted, who lives near Seoul. Yuna and her family took Ben and fellow POWER employee Jason Logan to a traditional Korean restaurant for lunch, followed by a tour of the old palace downtown.

“For me, traveling abroad and going to see the sites is one thing,” says Ben, “But when you travel abroad and go see people you know and they share their culture with you, it just makes that experience so much better. We didn’t only build the relationship with the students who stayed with us, but also with their families – it’s been a great experience and we’re lifelong friends now.”

In states like Idaho, they can explore more of the outdoors, worry less about crime, and experience what the local community has to offer.

School’s in

Students usually arrive in early August, a week or two before school starts. They stay through the school year, but within a week, most are back home with their own families. Generally, parents of the students don’t visit while school is in session, but they will often take a trip around the U.S. once the program ends. The kids are on a J-1 Visa which allows them to stay 30 days past the end of the school year.

“Most of the students want to go to California or Florida or New York, because that’s what they know overseas,” Ben says. “But studies within the organization have found that the kids that go to some of these smaller places, like Idaho, end up having better experiences.”

The students placed in bigger cities are often more restricted and are required to take more precautions. In states like Idaho, they can explore more of the outdoors, worry less about crime, and experience what the local community has to offer.

“The difficulty that we have here in the Boise area is that most of the schools are fairly full,” Ben says. “There are only so many slots that they open for exchange students.”

Although there are several exchange programs that place students in the area, some bigger schools will only have one or two spots for students each year. There’s typically more room for exchange students in rural schools, but it’s more challenging to find host families in these areas.

Overall, the Guths have loved their experience with the program. While it’s a big commitment, the relationships that are formed outweigh any financial impact of hosting a student. They plan on continuing with the program for years to come.

“I would say that people should consider hosting a kid, at least for a year, and find out what it’s like,” Ben says. “If you’re an empty-nester, if you don’t have kids, or if you have young children, it spices things up and it’s super, super rewarding.”

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