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Encountering arts and culture in Ottawa

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From Feb. 10 to 16, I experienced one of the nation's best cultural immersion programs for youth called Encounters With Canada during its Arts and Culture Week. The program centres in Ottawa and brings together high school students from across the country to make lasting friendships, learn more about Canadian culture, celebrate bilingualism, and tour the capital in a short seven-day timeframe. The experience is a unique opportunity that I certainly recommend to any high school student.

Upon arriving at the Terry Fox Centre, I felt a bit of a culture shock. I, a farm girl in Grade 12 at H. Hardcastle School in Edam, was surrounded by a group of New Brunswick girls speaking rapid French and British Columbians talking endlessly about “the island” and “mainlanders.”

I identified a lost-looking boy with long hockey hair and a leather bull-riding jacket, sighing with relief at the familiar character as he simply stated, “I’m from small town Alberta. You?” However, my culture shock was a pittance in comparison to the total looks of astonishment as I explained to the group, “Yeah, my town has like 450 people. We only had four graduates last year!”

One British Columbian, who claimed to be from the “small town” of Victoria asked me in shock, “You mean you don’t have a McDonald’s?” The concept of Edam was as foreign to them as coastal life was to me. Despite the cultural gaps and occasional language barrier, all 117 participants had one important thing in common: we were all excited to begin our time at Encounters With Canada.

Throughout the week, we visited many of Ottawa's monumental locations including Parliament Hill, the grave of the Unknown Soldier and the National Gallery of Canada. During our Parliament visit, we had the opportunity to watch Canada's politicians at work during a question period in the House of Commons. It was incredible to see democracy in action, and extremely entertaining to hear the banter between rival MPs; one MP made a Vanilla Ice reference and suggested his opposition take up a rap career as “Vanilla Not-So-Nice.”

Because I attended Arts and Culture Week, the cultural activities and workshops focused on the arts. Some of the workshops included slam poetry, miming, break dancing and djembe drum lessons. Performers such as Masabo — an African story-telling, drum-playing, dancing quartet — entertained us in the evenings. I attended All You Need Is Love, a Beatles tribute backed by an entire orchestra, at the National Arts Centre.

Other activities included shopping in downtown Ottawa, visiting the house of the Governor General, paying tribute to Canada's soldiers at the National Military Cemetery, and bowling in the neighbouring Gatineau, Que.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of EWC is the differing cultures and the formation of new friendships. The cultural norms of other provinces were learned simply by interacting with fellow participants. One evening, each province presented a skit that represented their culture. Prince Edward Island sang a song about potatoes and played the fiddle, the Albertans line-danced to Cadillac Ranch and the Quebecois performed their skit in French (I caught two key terms – “poutine” and “Celine Dion”).

The Saskatchewan group represented the province well with a skit referencing -4 C as “beautiful July weather” and a performance of The Last Saskatchewan Pirate. The entire EWC experience helped me understand what it meant to be from Saskatchewan and put my province in a national context.

By the end of the week, lasting friendships were formed. To the outsider, it seems preposterous that seven days is enough time to make a life-long friendship, but to the EWC attendee it is 100 per cent natural. My week was highlighted by the strong friendships I formed with two young men from Alberta and Quebec. For everyone, the week ended in hugs, promises to visit, and the occasional tearful goodbye. Participants left Ottawa with culturally diverse groups of new friends, unique experiences and an increased sense of confidence.

I definitely recommend Encounters With Canada. If you're a high school student and are interested in attending, talk to your school guidance counsellor or visit the Encounters With Canada website at www.ewc-rdc.ca. My experience was fantastic, and I hope others seize the opportunity to become involved and enjoy what Encounters With Canada has to offer.

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