

Dear all volunteers of AFS,

This letter is to share my thoughts and express my gratitude on the value I have received from being a volunteer with AFS. I believe it is important to share what I now understand (even though most of you have probably already worked this out) in the event that a potential, undecided volunteer may become curious and now step forward.

I connected with AFS when I understood that there is a mission behind sending exchange students around the world. Somehow I felt this was important work that AFS does. We know that, deep down, we ALL need to contribute to a just and peaceful world. The wars and destructive events that had, and were occurring, when I joined weren't great indicators of a future I wanted for my family or myself to grow old in.

My initial volunteering was done more out of the fact that I felt forced to help out and I didn't want such a noble vision to fail because **I didn't think I had the time** to help out. We all have the same amount of time. Its how we choose to fill it!

What I never believed could have happened was the opportunity I received for learning. Volunteering with AFS taught me more about myself, more about the similarities in the world, and differences in our Australian culture, not only between states but also between the city and the country, than I could have ever have learned in any course I was studying, any book I could read or any program I have seen on tv.

I thank the experience of hosting for having opened my eyes to the fact that what I thought I knew about the world from second hand accounts in the media was indeed not true but was shaped by the one or few people who present the news and that that was where much of my judgement came from. Deep down we all believe our way is better. When you connect with people you get greater understanding.

Perhaps the most important concept that I take away with me from AFS is the saying that embodies the AFS mission of understanding that many people can do the same thing in many different ways and that's OK. If we can be comfortable with opening up our minds to the fact that there is not just one reality in the world but there are many **and we can live with many realities**, we are heading for a better, **safer** future.

Does anybody know the saying???

***Its not right, its not wrong, its JUST DIFFERENT!***

You may be asking yourselves, "Why is this so important to me?"

Through having been involved in the many roles of AFS, I have learned that we all breathe, we all need to eat, be loved, be safe, feel valued and find our value, be understood and respected as human beings, despite our race, gender, tribe, religious or other beliefs. We also all need to create time to reflect and connect.

What I also learned is that whenever there is some form of conflict going on (whether it is with family, students (including my own hosted students who were fantastic teachers), host families, siblings, AFS employees, or volunteers), that it is usually one of my values that is being stood on or not respected. Once aware of that and we find which values are more important for both parties we move on with greater understanding and respect for the perspective of the other. We connect. Can you believe it was a (very wise) host student who first got me to even think about what values are? What we learn from teenagers!

A final learning to mention (there are numerous things that I have learned but haven't mentioned) is that by contributing to something that is a valuable idea, that I felt that I really had a purpose in the world, not just that of being a family member or working in some job somewhere.

Its not right, its not wrong, Its JUST different allows me to make my world richer, more interesting and more fulfilling. It allows me to get curious as to the perspective of what it must be like to stand in another's shoes and it offers me the challenge to realise that if I don't know everything, then what could I possibly add to what I do know. How does that change what I think I fear?

Doing the volunteer jobs that took me outside my comfort zone (and gave me masses of confidence) are still nothing compared to what each and every young person does when they step on that plane to travel to another "world". We should always remember that.

Being involved with AFS in any capacity means you rely on the belief (and accept the responsibility) that this group will care about another human being. What a belief and a leap of faith in human nature that one person has in someone from another part of the world. What makes someone have this much belief? What is the value a student will receive from such a leap of faith? What is the responsibility that we need to consider that will add value to each and every brave person involved?

Can you now see why this is such important work? So, I challenge you to turn off the t.v. (which will create some time for you to contribute to our world). Connect with someone you don't know and get curious about perspective and what is similar about you both.

This experience has given me the confidence to make a difference somewhere else now and while I am sad to move on, I thank AFS and the people I have met for giving me so much value and belief that I can be the difference I want to be in the world.

Remember that we all need to share the responsibility. For what you give you will get back much more if you choose to be open to the value beyond the tangible things. I apologise to all of you who had to listen to me sharing my "thoughts out loud" and thank you for the patience you had to just listen as that helped me to learn and grow. Best wishes for future growth.

Martine Middendorp