

GENEVIEVE COX

Germany

Sponsor Club - RC of Richmond

“Wie Dumb bist du?”

“How dumb are you” was my first immediate thought after stepping of the plane at Frankfurt International Airport. I could already feel the cold nipping at my fingertips, seeping into my legs; the type of cold that you never really ever manage to shake off, at least not until after Easter when you finally see the sun again. It was my first day in Germany, one of those days that you will always remember for the rest of your life. I don’t remember all the details (if you were to ask me what time my plane arrived, what I had eaten - I’d be at a complete loss) but I do remember three distinct things beyond the cold:

My host family welcomed me in a confusing mixture of German (that I couldn’t understand) and English (that after exactly 24 hours of travelling I felt that I couldn’t understand). The butterflies in my stomach felt like they were thrashing around in the Mosh pit of a heavy metal concert. The distinct and utterly despairing feeling that I was an absolute idiot for getting myself into this situation.

“How dumb are you?” I barely knew these people, this culture and yet there I was; standing in the middle of Frankfurt Airport, the first day of my 355

days away from home. Ten days off one year I would be living in Germany as an Exchange Student.

It was not the first time that I would take a moment, lose focus and just think to myself “How dumb are you?” during my Exchange; it actually turned out to be a common event:

The second time was in my third day in Germany, my first day of school. A teacher with presumably very nice intentions of asking me about myself, stopped me in the middle of class and attacked me with an overwhelming (and seemingly unending) flurry of German.

I sat there, eyes wide with astonishment and embarrassment that I had understood exactly none of what she had just said. I turned left to my host sister, silently begging for her help and while she answered all of the teacher’s questions with the finesse of a first born language speaker, I sat there with my newly adopted mantra running through my head- “How dumb are you?”

I couldn’t even answer the most basic of questions in the language of the country I had gone to, how was I ever going to understand what was happening?



Exchange friends and friends

After that the moments that made me pause and repeat my mantra became indistinct, but very common; If I got lost on the way home “How dumb are you” if I pronounced a word wrong “How dumb are you” If I accidentally used the casual form of German, instead of formal at a Rotary meeting “How dumb are you”

But in all of my despair that I was an idiot I slowly found myself learning to love this strange, confusing and scary land. I learnt the benefits of a punctual society, I learnt to slowly love the language that I was learning with its literal translations and efficient methods (handschuhe, nackschneke, umarmung are a few examples). I never learnt to love the school, but I learnt to love the way pupils were treated by teachers and adults.

Slowly my Mantra of “How dumb are you” became “I love this place.” The change was slow and

eventual, but I wouldn't be thinking anything else now. I truly do love this country and its people.

I love the lazy Sundays and busy week days, I love the tiny towns and old churches, I love the Bavarian forests and nature walks, I love the history soaked deep into the soil of this country and I really, really love the pretzels.

I will never forget how stupid I am, but it is something I have learnt to accept; just as I have learnt to accept the other portions of myself. I will forever thank Rotary for providing me with this opportunity to live abroad. I would never trade my idiocy, for it has brought me here, to my second home. I answer proudly now “ja klar bin ich dumb.”

I am a proud idiot, a proud Australian, a proud German and a proud Exchange Student.



Oktoberfest in Munich (above); Eurotour memories in Budapest (above right); meeting new Districts and new friends at camp (right)



Clockwise from top left:- Eurotour in Venice; Exploring the Hanover Town Hall; representing the Australia at Koln Cathedral; Eurotour again; American Rotary Youth Exchange friends; Eurotour memories in Venice.

