

As a parent, I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity my son, Eli, had to participate in the Gastonia Sister Cities Program. From the very beginning, the program was thoughtfully organized and designed to help students gain a deeper understanding of another culture while developing confidence, independence, and lifelong friendships.

One of the things I appreciated most was how well parents were kept informed throughout the entire experience. Both the chaperones and Eli's host family communicated regularly, sharing updates, photos, and details about the students' activities. As a parent sending my child to another country without me for the first time, that communication provided tremendous peace of mind and allowed me to fully enjoy watching his journey unfold from home.

I also loved hearing about everything Eli learned during the cultural preparation classes leading up to the trip. The program did an excellent job of preparing students for the experience. He learned about Peruvian customs, traditions, and daily life, and even had opportunities to try Peruvian food before traveling. This helped him feel more comfortable and gave him an idea of what to expect when he arrived in Peru.

Participating in the exchange also allowed Eli to gain a level of independence that would have been difficult to achieve in other ways. Traveling internationally without his parents taught him responsibility, adaptability, and self-confidence. Watching him navigate new experiences and return home with a greater sense of maturity was truly rewarding.

When asked about his favorite part of the trip, Eli's answer is always the same—the relationships he built with the students at the school. He came home with countless stories and shared experiences. He had the opportunity to stand in front of classrooms and talk with students about American culture, collaborate on video projects for the school's news channel, and share his personal experiences as an American teenager. These interactions helped him build meaningful connections while also learning from his peers in Peru.

Some of the highlights he often talks about include attending a lecture taught entirely in Spanish, participating in dance classes, and joining physical education classes alongside the Peruvian students. These immersive experiences gave him a firsthand understanding of another culture in a way that simply cannot be replicated through textbooks or classroom lessons.

The Gastonia Sister Cities Program provided so much more than an international trip. It fostered cultural understanding, personal growth, independence, and global friendships. As parents, we watched our son grow in confidence and maturity throughout the process,

and we are incredibly thankful to everyone who dedicates their time and energy to making this program possible.

This experience has left a lasting impact not only on Eli but on our entire family. The relationships he formed, the cultural experiences he gained, and the confidence he developed will stay with him for years to come. We are especially excited to welcome his program brother, David, to Gastonia this fall and continue the exchange by sharing our hometown and culture with him. We wholeheartedly recommend the Gastonia Sister Cities Foreign Exchange Program to other families. The memories, lessons, and connections gained through this experience truly last a lifetime.

Nikki Kennedy

*Parent of Gastonia Sister Cities Student Ambassador Eli Dunn*