



JENNY COON PETERSON

Pole position

To further a better understanding of world cultures, The Rotary Foundation annually exchanges travelers. Next month, four women are Poland-bound.

BY JENNY COON PETERSON

"Cze, nazywam si."

Megan Elliott was learning Polish. "Attempting," Elliott corrected, "attempting to learn Polish."

OK, Megan Elliott was attempting to learn Polish, sitting cross-legged on a couch in her living room, with a language CD loudly intoning Polish pronunciation and a book to follow along with balanced on her knee.

She has been chosen as one of four participants to represent Oklahoma this spring as part of The Rotary Foundation's Group Study Exchange — or GSE — for Oklahoma's District 5750, and attempting to learn Polish is just one of her new responsibilities. Her fellow team members are Sheri Guyse, Laura Ballard and team leader Danna Szymanski.

Although Elliott's a bit nervous to be leaving her job and family for an entire month, her excitement outweighs any trepidation.

"I'm really looking forward to be able to see Poland in a different light, something beyond being a tourist," she said.

The Rotary GSE program is set up for young professionals like Elliott for exactly this reason.

"The purpose of the program," said Randy Goodman, GSE chairman for District 5750, "is as a vocational and cultural exchange to promote a better understanding of world cultures."

Every year, the district chooses a different Rotary district with which to exchange young professionals between the ages of 25 and 40 who are not Rotarians themselves. This year, the program is taking participants to

above, clockwise, from left Megan Elliott, Laura Ballard, Danna Szymanski and Sheri Guyse are headed to Poland next month as part of a Rotary exchange program.

Poland and Ukraine. In the past, the program has gone to places such as India, Australia, Turkey and Brazil. The 2009 exchange is lined up for Bolivia. Each trip lasts from four to six weeks.

"Leaving for an entire month is something that not many people are able to do because of jobs, family or finances," Elliott said, "but I'm fortunate that my boss is such a believer in people bettering themselves through many different facets."

Elliott, the office coordinator for Accel Financial Staffing, said her boss — Meg Salyer, a Rotarian with Club 29 — urged her to apply for the opportunity.

Goodman understands that not everyone can take that time away from their family and career, but he said "for those who can, they will have the experience of a lifetime."

He knows firsthand the benefits of the exchange program. As part of GSE, he visited Turkey in 1997 and joined the Rotary in December that same year. Through his involvement with Rotary, Goodman kept an interest in this unique program and traveled to Brazil in 2007 as a team leader.

Staying with Rotarians in Rio de Janeiro, the team had the opportunity to see another side of the city, visiting *favelas* — or ghettos — where the local Rotarians do much humanitarian work.

STUDY NOTES

Group Study Exchange is a free program offered through The Rotary Foundation. Here's what you need to know about the program and how to participate.

WHAT: Rotary District 5750 of Oklahoma chooses participants each year to take part in a four-to-six-week exchange program with another district in Rotary International. Participants are chosen through an application and interview process.

WHERE: The exchange goes wherever Rotary International has a presence. This year, the team is heading to Poland and Ukraine for one month. Next year's team is slated to go to Bolivia.

WHO: The program is open to young professionals between the ages of 25 and 40. The participants cannot be Rotarians or the sons or daughters of Rotarians. Becoming a member of Rotary is not required of returning team members, but most choose to join after their experience.

HOW MUCH: The program is virtually all-expenses-paid. Of course, participants need to be able to take an entire month off of work.

For more information or to apply, visit www.rotary5750.org.

—Jenny Coon Peterson

"As a GSE team member, you often see sights the ordinary vacationer would not see," Goodman said.

Stepping past the boundary of being a tourist was the draw for Guyse to participate.

"The food, the people, the customs — I cannot wait to see how different their world is from ours," Guyse said. "In that same vein, however, I cannot wait to see how similar our lives can be."

Fellow participant Ballard agreed. "My heart beats inside my chest for the very purpose of seeing the world and the people that populate it," she said. "When you strip away everything superficial, we are all alike with the same needs and wants."

Ballard, who also participated in the 2005 GSE exchange to Thailand, is a true world traveler, so far having visited 33 states, plus

LIFE TRAVEL

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—*Sheri Guyse, participant in The Rotary Foundation's Group Study Exchange*

countries on three continents.

While the immersion in another culture is a large aspect of the exchange, that's not all of it. During the trip, Goodman explained, participants stay with hosts who are members of the local Rotary and are expected to represent the club that is sponsoring them. They achieve this by visiting the clubs and presenting a five-minute speech on different aspects of Oklahoma. They also exchange club flags with each place they visit.

Here's the catch, however, and the

reason Elliott is furiously learning Polish pronunciation: The speech is recited entirely in that language.

"We probably could present in English," she said, "but as a sign of respect, we're going to do our best to learn Polish and present in Polish."

Elliott will present on the recent Oklahoma centennial. Other speech topics include American Indian heritage and the arts. The participants are also expected to make a presentation to their host club when they return home and speak at the 2009 Rotary District 5750 conference.

Above all, the exchange was developed by The Rotary Foundation as a tool for young professionals to not only understand the global community on a personal level, but on a professional level, as well.

For Ballard, a conversion analyst with financial-industry software provider Metavante Image Solutions, this means getting to know a potential new market. The company works throughout the United States, Caribbean, Asia and Africa, but has yet to gain a foothold in Eastern Europe.

"We don't have a grasp on the financial industry in Eastern Europe, so I am most interested in seeing how the industry operates there and how it dif-

fers from the way we do business here," Ballard said.

For Guyse, public relations director for the South Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, the opportunities to benefit her career through the exchange are endless.

"We each hail from different occupational backgrounds, so I anticipate the vocational visits will be full of variety," Guyse said.

While Oklahoma's GSE participants are preparing for their exchange, five participants from District 2230 in Poland will be doing the same. The group from Poland will stay in Oklahoma for a month, visiting local clubs and staying with host families just like their counterparts will be doing.

"Staying with a host family not only promotes fellowship and goodwill, it provides the visiting team members intimate insight into the day-to-day life of the host country and its people," said James Little, District 5750 inbound coordinator.

The group will be visiting 12 clubs in Oklahoma, stretching from Woodward to Cushing to Ponca City, experiencing life at each stop.

"The cultural aspect is up to each host club and will range anywhere from a visit to the Oklahoma City Museum of

Art to a chicken dinner at Eischen's and all points in between," Little said.

Interspersed with trips to host clubs, the group will also get a behind-the-scenes view of life in the Sooner State, which will include everything from the running of schools and hospitals to the inner workings of local government.

With all of this to keep track of, Little is clear about his biggest priority: "Most importantly, my job is to ensure when water starts to leak, the dam doesn't break."

Yet, for all of the coordination it takes on both sides to ensure a worthwhile exchange, Little wholeheartedly believes the GSE program is an amazing opportunity for all involved. Elliott agreed.

"Rotary really has set up a phenomenal opportunity for young professionals to learn about other cultures and enhance their understanding of the world in a business and personal sense and how it all fits together," Elliott said. "I am so honored to be selected as a representative for Oklahoma."

With the countdown to the April departure steadily approaching, there's a laundry list of things to get done before the trip. But, for right now, Elliott closed her eyes and repeated, "*Mito mi ciebie pozna.*" **OKG**