

Swiss foreign exchange student explores new culture in Holyoke

Written by Darci Tomky



With a love of travel and experiencing new cultures, Severine Barras was recently welcomed to HHS as this year's only foreign exchange student. A native of Switzerland, she will be spending the school year with her host family Thom, Julie and Camille Elliott.

Holyoke is a bit of a change for Barras compared to her hometown of Bern, the capital city of Switzerland with a population of over 300,000 people. One aspect of living that differs is the amount of space, noted Barras. In Switzerland, the houses are closer together, and they don't have big yards like families in America. Switzerland is also very green with trees and mountains, and Barras said she certainly couldn't see as far into the distance as she can here.

In Switzerland, Barras attended a school with 1,200 people, so for her it's nice how everyone at HHS knows everyone else. They are all "famous for a little town," said Barras. She jokingly pointed out that while it's good to know everyone, students must be careful of what they say or the whole school will end up hearing of it the next day.

Because she is the only foreign exchange student, Barras said it has been good to force her to make friends in Holyoke. Before coming here she was anxious about finding a group to fit in to, but now she has found it's been easy to connect, and she meets new people every day. With English as her third language, Barras is also excited to improve her communication skills.

As a senior at HHS, Barras said one major difference about school is the mixing of grade levels in the same class. In Switzerland, a senior would never be in a class with a freshman.

Another difference is the transportation. Missing the public transportation system in Europe, Barras has been walking and riding her bike and is surprised at how many people drive their cars to school and work.

This year, Barras is hoping to get involved with choir, jazz band, the play and musical, FBLA and even basketball.

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Barras has enjoyed spending time with her host family and has had fun with her new role as big sister to her host sister Camille, a freshman at HHS.

Kicking off her time in America, Barras spent a week in New York City with other exchange students. During the year, she plans to travel some with her host family and is also planning trips to Washington D.C. and possibly Los Angeles or Chicago.