

Touchstone Story #49 Citizens of the World



Photo Caption 1: In 1960, Lions from District 4 in California and Nevada and District 302-W in Japan hosted a youth exchange program. At the end of the summer, the two groups met in San Diego to exchange stories about their visits.

To promote peace and understanding, why not start with some of the world's younger citizens?

This was the mindset of Lions from the Kobe East Lions Club in Japan and Multiple District 4 in California and Nevada when they began considering hosting an international youth exchange program during summer vacations. Students could stay with local Lions and their families, learn about a new culture, make new friends and explore a different part of the world.

In 1960, nine students from Japan headed to California, while 13 young Californians left for an adventure across the Pacific in Japan. It didn't take long for the broader Lions organization to catch wind of the successful enterprise. Lions Clubs International formally adopted the Lions Youth Exchange Program in 1961, later renamed Lions Youth Camps and Exchange program, taking the Lions mission to foster peace and understanding to a new level.



The program's first official participant was 16-year-old Lorenzo Calabrese, sponsored by the Lions Club in Bari, Italy. Lion Sam Verdi and his family in Detroit, Michigan, USA, hosted Calabrese. By the end of the year, 130 other exchanges had taken place worldwide.

While students usually traveled alone to their host homes, so many students wanted to join the program in the late 1960s that Lions occasionally chartered planes to help facilitate travel. At one point, 300 students from Finland, Sweden and France gathered on a Lions charter plane to New York, where they were met by Lions and sent on to locations across the United States.

Lions in some countries took a different route to promoting cultural exchanges. They hosted youth camps to help young people exchange ideas and unite in shared experiences. At a 1965 camp in Montgomery, Alabama, USA, 40 participants from India, Finland, Denmark, Canada, the United States, Japan and Sweden became such good friends that they hoped to meet 10 years later at the 1975 Lions Clubs International Convention, which turned out to be Dallas, Texas, USA.

As of 2015, Lions operated youth camps in 39 countries, from Estonia to Israel, Tunisia to Mexico, Sri Lanka to Norway. While the Lions Youth Camps and Exchange program has allowed Lions to help many participants develop a global mindset, the program's impact goes far beyond cultural understanding.

After Stephanie Theyssen, a shy, reserved young woman from Belgium, attended a Lions camp in Hawaii in 2011, she returned home with the intention to practice "ohana," the Hawaiian word for cooperating and treating everyone as an extended member of the family. "This youth camp changed my life in many different ways," said Theyssen. "[It] gave me balance: spiritual, cultural, independence, confidence."



More than 1,000 students on average participate in the program each year. From expanding horizons to altering worldviews, when young people engage with other nationalities and cultures through Lions Clubs International, their lives are forever changed for good.



Photo Caption 2: Teenagers from around the world continue to build lasting relationships and international perspectives through the Lions Youth Camps and Exchange program.

