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The Rotary International Foundation
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cc: Frank Bradshaw, District 6200 Governor
Joe Miller Jr., Lake Charles Rotary Club
Judith Ward, District 9750 Governor
Robert Mitchell, Sydney Rotary Club
Donna Landry, District 6200 Scholarship Coordinator

To The Rotary Foundation:

Please accept the following as my final report submission, in accordance with the requirements prescribed for Rotary Foundation Academic-Year Ambassadorial Scholars. It is quite sobering to write this, as it indicates the conclusion of my scholarship year. However, the lasting effects of a single year overseas are profound. They have ignited in me a deeper concern and understanding of international and cultural affairs, as well as a determination to direct my energy, education and professional experience in pursuit of world peace and understanding. Thus, I suspect my role as an ambassador of truth, goodwill and friendships has only just begun.

Pomp and Circumstances

Though I will not be there to walk across the stage or toss my tassel, I did successfully complete a Master of Arts in English Studies at the University of New South Wales. The funds awarded me by The Rotary Foundation adequately covered tuition, room and board and the majority of school supplies and textbooks. I would, however, strongly encourage future outbound scholars to save a significant amount of money in addition to the scholarship to allow for extracurricular cultural endeavors and an ease of living.

I experienced a bit of confusion with the UNSW Treasury Department at the beginning of the year. Since I could not be classified as an exchange student but was supported by the scholarship, the department wanted to send my tuition bills directly to The Foundation. It took some finagling to arrange for those bills to be sent to me, as had the scholarship funds. Similar situations have occurred in previous years with Rotary scholars at UNSW.

My housing arrangements left nothing to be desired. By living on campus, I truly immersed myself in both the Australian and university cultures. Because many fellow residents were in their first and second years of university, I was given a firsthand sampling of the typical Australian undergraduate experience, while I individually partook in the typical Australian graduate experience. Additionally, through my Rotaract friendships, I also experienced vicariously the life of young professionals in Sydney. I would not

hesitate to say that I enjoyed the best of many worlds, and unlike other American exchange students I met, the majority of my friends and acquaintances were Australian.

Among Australian universities, UNSW is second in reputation only to Sydney University, which is considered to be the more traditional and “Ivy League” of the two. My enrollment in the more liberal and progressive UNSW School of English, however, was indeed the better match. Rather than an inflexible and strictly academic degree in literature, or a narrowly focused study of the arguably outdated Western Canon, I benefited from a contemporary and relevant exploration of literary studies and critical theory, and I obtained a degree that is applicable. My studies included an analysis of contemporary Australian children’s literature and its use as a socialization tool, as well as an examination of post-colonial literature and the means by which formerly colonized people appropriate the English language and employ it in their development of an independent national identity.

I completed my degree with a 3.4/4.0 grade point average or on the Australian “weighted average mark” (WAM) system, a high distinction of 86/100. From my understanding, this was one of the highest assessments among my classmates, though in my opinion and against my academic record, it is rather unimpressive. The Australian education system focuses more on students’ comprehension and whether they pass or fail, and less on their actual. Further, it maintains a much higher standard of excellence and academic difficulty level than found in the United States. Thus, you find an overall lower numeric average, even among the more advanced students.

Impressive intellectual focus and retention are demanded of Australian students as early as high school. They do not leave fundamental mathematics, history and other general studies to be mastered in university, as they are in America; students in Australia graduate from high school with a solid and broad knowledge base. They must have determined their intended career before graduation, and accordingly, seniors take an HSC exam that determines whether they are able to apply to university and pursue their selected careers. If their scores are unacceptable, many students study for another year and retake the exam. What results from this extraordinary practice is an influx of focused and prepared first-year university students, and far less changing of majors. Indeed, first-year medical students actually study cadavers. Ultimately, this system produces an admirably skilled and dedicated work force.

The convenience of a one-year, all-coursework master’s degree truly maximized my educational experience, and now places me in a much more qualified position as I look to re-start my career. Additionally, several extracurricular opportunities arose last year that allowed me to further refine my professional editorial and communications skills while being away from the work force.

The UNSW School of English is one of the few universities around the world that offers a course in juvenilia. Involving the study of literature composed by well-known authors at precocious ages, juvenilia is a new and increasingly recognized academic field within the realm of English Studies. The field, the term and the potential academic and commercial value of juvenilia are all still in formative stages. It was intellectually riveting to participate in heated debates with classmates and professors over whether juvenilia can or should constitute a genre. As an extension of the class, we were asked to prepare lesson plans and lead undergraduate tutorial sessions to further introduce and explore varying perspectives on the subject.

My professor’s primary objective was for us to transcribe the original manuscript of Charlotte Brontë’s “Tales of the Islanders, Volume II” (written when she was approximately thirteen) and publish it in collaboration with the Alberta, Canada-based Juvenilia Press. Charlotte Brontë suffered from myopia, and twenty-five lines of her manuscript took up a space not much larger than a sticky note. Thus, the initial transcription was a painstaking process executed in coffee-shop sessions over lattes and magnifying glasses. Once the transcription was finalized, I led the textual editorial team and directed the

establishment of an editorial policy that would preserve the invaluable intricacies of Charlotte's authorial apprenticeship, while allowing for unobstructed and enjoyable reading. The final product was launched November 17, and print copies are currently available in select bookstores and on the Web. The project itself was rewarding, but walking away from it with editorial credits in a print publication was truly remarkable.

Additionally, my participation in two creative writing classes last year led to my involvement in the creation of a new online creative writing journal sponsored by the UNSW School of English. *Rubric* is designed to showcase students' written talent and eventually rival the industry's most prestigious online journals. I became a member of the editorial board in November – my first experience in evaluating and editing creative works – and helped lay the groundwork for *Rubric*'s design, policies and launch. Among several outstanding student works, one of my poems was blindly selected for publication and will be featured in the journal's first edition, to which I continue to contribute from Houston.

Finally, as I mentioned in my two-month report, I was offered the opportunity to serve as a Duty Tutor at Basser College, the dormitory in which I resided on campus at UNSW. Among various other responsibilities to benefit the resident community, I held the role of academic adviser and met with residents individually to proofread and review their essay assignments. At the time many of my residents began their schooling, grammar was dropped from primary school syllabi and replaced with a more focused study of literature. What has resulted in many cases is a deficient understanding of the English language and its usage. The situation at Basser was compounded by the verbal and written difficulties experienced by its significant Asian population. As a Duty Tutor, I offered assistance in essay structure, research, writing, editing and revising, and I was able to help several students dramatically improve their marks and their written communication skills. Concurrently, I maintained and further polished my own editorial skills.

Though I was regularly and humorously questioned on my decision to study English in Australia (where their spoken English is so refined!), I believe my understanding of the language and its usage was put to good use. Furthermore, as I had been introduced to in my previous position at Ford Motor Company, I was able to more closely study the regional and colloquial differences between American Standard English and the more British-influenced Australian Standard English, as well as cross-cultural communication. These were two objectives I set out to achieve as a scholar as early as in my application essays.

Relevant, Rewarding Rotary

One thing I must say about Rotary in Australia, as compared to Rotary in America, is that it seemed to be much more frequently at the tips of people's tongues. When asked about my scholarship at home, I first have to explain what The Rotary Foundation and Rotary International are; however, when I said "Rotary" in Australia, I was immediately understood. I found Rotary in the most unlikely places: on wishing wells in parks along the Great Ocean Road, holding art exhibits in the tiny foothill towns of Victoria's Grampian Mountains, on the business cards of fellow Basser residents (a.k.a. former Youth Exchange students) and in the names of country town avenues. Rotary is everywhere in Australia.

Getting Connected: The Rotary Network

The Rotary Club of Sydney, my host club, is by far Australia's largest club, with more than 200 active members. From my understanding, the club is admirably striving to evolve in two key internal areas. The first is demographics. Historically, Sydney Rotary has been considered an older club, as the majority of its members are 50 years of age or older. The club finds difficulty in recruiting and retaining Rotarians in

their 30s and 40s, due to family and other personal commitments typical of that age. When I arrived, Sydney Rotary was actively working to breakdown this reputation by analyzing their demographic profile, examining the turnover rate of its younger members and producing reports on how to attract members of that vital age group. In the words of Sydney Rotary Past President Bill Chillingworth, they were looking to “make Rotary relevant” in the Sydney community.

Secondly, many Sydney Rotarians spoke with me about their concern regarding the club’s sheer size. Among 200+ people, it is easy to maintain low-profile activity by simply making monetary donations, but what Bill Chillingworth encouraged was the potential power in their numbers. He rallied Rotarians by addressing the difference between being a Rotary member and being a Rotarian. In his experience, being a Rotary member involves paying dues and attending meetings, which he had done for many years. He discovered what it meant to be a true Rotarian when he went on a Polio Plus expedition, when he held in his hand the cure and when he administered it to maybe just one out of millions of potentially sick people.

I found this idea to be powerful and transferred Bill’s comments to my own situation as an Ambassadorial Scholar. I drew a personal line separating myself as the recipient of a Rotary scholarship (diligently giving speeches, writing reports and building relationships) and myself as a cultural ambassador and person of service (getting my hands dirty and really making a difference). The effects, I hope, were evident in my community involvement.

With so many members and such challenging goals, it seemed that I might easily become lost among my host club’s ambitious agenda, but this was not the case at all. Immediately, I was taken in under the wings of several Rotarians, namely my host Rotarian, Robert Mitchell, and his beautiful family, and I was given a welcome that was truly and uniquely Australian. “G’day,” they said to me, with a customary kiss on the cheek, and indeed it was a good day.

There are actually four Rotary Clubs within Sydney, and I was well looked after by all of them. The Sydney Rotarians took very seriously my pledge to become as active as possible in their community service efforts, and in the spirited, healthy and balanced manner that is traditionally Australian, they were also keen to ensure that I had a fantastic time in Australia last year. Indeed, each time I updated Robert on my academic and community service efforts, he nodded approvingly, then gestured for more and said something to the effect of, “Yeah, and are you getting out there and having some fun, too?”

Only days after my initial introduction to the Rotary Club of Sydney, on March 5, my phone was ringing and my planner buckling with opportunities for service and invitations to social events, from barbecues and bushwalks to wine tasting sessions and harbour regattas. In my first week, I joined Rotarian Derek Hill and his Your City group of high school students from various country towns on a tour of Sydney’s most historic and educational sites. I was also given spare tickets by Rotarian Ian Angus to see the Australian Chamber Orchestra at Sydney’s iconic Opera House. To a music major and flautist, this was an act of generosity and an introduction to the city’s cultural side that I might never forget.

Rotarian Andrew Grill kindly invited me to join various Sydney Rotary Clubs and the city’s two primary Rotaract clubs in their annual Rotary vs. Rotaract Debate on March 13. This turned out to be a critical invitation, as the contacts I made at the debate led to my permanent involvement with the Sydney City Rotaract Club. Despite my imminent departure, I became an inducted member of the club on July 24.

Also at the debate, I was introduced to Rotarian Paul Ward-Harvey, and at his invitation I attended my first Rotary Club of Sydney Cove meeting the following Friday morning, onboard a Captain Cook Cruise ship docked at Circular Quay – Sydney Harbour’s main wharf. Though I was slow to manage Weetbix – the Australian breakfast of champions – over a slowly rocking Sydney skyline, I did take quickly to the young and feisty Sydney Cove Rotarians, or “Coves”.

I was very lucky to sustain a connection with the Rotarians at Wharf 6 through Paul. On March 16, I cheered for their high-school debaters at the Rotary-sponsored Mock United Nations Assembly (M.U.N.A.) Convention – held at the Nan Tien Buddhist Temple, the largest in the Southern Hemisphere. Later in the year, on September 10, I was invited to join them in a tasting session of New Zealand wines. Hosted by a Sydney Cove Rotarian and held in his offices at Air New Zealand, the event was one of Sydney Cove's regular Boardroom Bashes.

In the ways of service, I was primarily involved with the Rotary Club of Sydney in various fund-raising roles. On May 1, I helped host a private art showing, titled "Living With Art", at the home of Sydney's two most well known connoisseurs and collectors. From the doorknobs to the wall tapestry, everything in that house was a piece of art, and dozens of people turned out to witness. Money raised at the door and from raffle ticket sales totaled \$4500 and benefited the Adrian Golding Gift of Life Fund, which brings children from the Southwest Pacific Islands to Australia to have life-saving surgeries performed.

In June, I spruced up and helped host Sydney Rotary's annual black-tie fundraiser in collaboration with ING, one of the city's premiere businesses. Held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the event attracted hundreds of Rotarians and guests, and through the auction of precious works and artifacts, raffle ticket sales and other fund-raising efforts that night, Sydney Rotary raised \$100,000 for the children of Sydney's Spastic Centre.

So Much to Say

At the District 9750 Conference, held in the nation's capitol of Canberra from March 22-24, I happily met my Foundation counterparts – the other twelve Ambassadorial Scholars in Sydney. I was a little surprised to learn that 8 of us were American, 2 Canadian, 1 German, 1 French and 1 Scottish, but these numbers were quickly applied as the reason behind why we found difficulty securing speaking engagements. With so many of us to choose from, and then with so many of us from a common country, it seemed explainable that we had only managed a couple by that point.

Only after portions of my two-month report were published in the District 9750 newsletter (which was ultimately flattering) did I really start receiving invitations to speak across the district. In my first semester, I spoke once, at the Rotary Club of Rose Bay, and participated in one radio interview. However in my last six months, I gave eleven speeches and one quick recital. (That's right, I brushed the cobwebs off my flute and performed solo at the Rotary Club of Sydney's Christmas luncheon on December 17.) Needless to say, the second half of my year really picked up speed.

I suppose I may have breached the standard anecdotal Ambassadorial Scholar presentation in my speeches. While I did inform Australians of Louisiana's unique personality and culture – from our Creole/Cajun immigration history to Mardi Gras to our influx of casinos and riverboats – my primary aim in those speeches was to sell The Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholarship program. To do that, I shared with Rotarians what I thought was more provocative and tangible – my personal transformation, the cultural and general eye-opening that only a year overseas can incite. Please see the final sections of this report for more on the content of my speeches.

The reception of my youthful perspective and message was invariably enthusiastic. By the end of the year, I could no longer count how many Rotarians had approached me to comment on how reassuring it was to find a young American that was aware of such important and overwhelming issues as "cultural insulation" and "ethnocentrism". I think, more importantly, many of those Rotarians were grateful to see young adults in general being more widely and globally educated. That's the value of this scholarship, and that's what I sought to spotlight.

Let me also add that several times over the course of last year, Rotarians complimented me on my public speaking abilities. In their experience and opinion, American young adults tend to show much more confidence in their speaking abilities than do Australians. I thought this was an interesting cultural observation, and in my conversations, I could only attribute it to the amount of presentations required of me in my high school and undergraduate careers. Perhaps this is a notable difference in educational structure between the two societies.

The majority of Rotary meetings I attended were dinner meetings, frequently at RSL Clubs – similar to our VFW halls – which allowed for social drinks. My favorite Australian Rotary Club customs, which I was introduced to at these evening meetings, were the toasts: one to the Queen or to Australia (depending on whether the majority were Royalists or Nationalists – always a hot topic!) and one to an international Rotary Club. Many District 9750 Clubs held this international toast by opening the international Rotary directory, arbitrarily selecting a Rotary Club abroad, reading very quickly some information about that club and then making a formal toast to it. It was an interesting way of learning about and being reminded of Rotary's vast international scope.

With the exception of Sydney Rotary, my audiences ranged from classroom-size groups of 25-30 to intimate, single-table gatherings of less than 10, at which I wondered whether it was even appropriate to stand. I met only a few female presidents, but similarly, only a few all-male clubs (in which I enjoyed Australian humor at its full force, and did well enough to dish it back). I was very happy to accept invitations to speak at the Inner Wheel of Camden's induction dinner and the Maroubra Probus Club for retirees, at which I explored the various extensions of Rotary in Sydney.

I should take advantage of this opportunity to formally acknowledge the dozens of generous Rotarians and Inner Wheel Club members who gladly escorted me back and forth between Basser College and the far reaches of District 9750. Without such transportation donations, I would not have been able to visit nearly as many clubs, and I would have missed out on seeing Sydney's various beautiful suburbs and neighboring towns. Each time I visited these clubs, I felt more like an honorary Australian than a foreign American. And each time, I donned the president with Mardi Gras beads and Tabasco sauce to ensure those Australians felt like honorary Cajuns, too. *Laissez les bons temps roulez!*

My final rundown of speaking engagements last year was as follows:

- Rotary Club of Rose Bay – April 30
- Radio Interview with Rev. Dr. Gordon Moyes on “Sunday Night Live” – May 12
- Inner Wheel of Camden – July 3
- Rotary Club of Wollongong North Fairy Meadow – August 19
- Rotary Club of Haberfield – September 3
- Rotary Club of Sydney CBD – September 9
- Maroubra Probus Club – September 18
- Rotary Club of Wollongong – September 24
- Rotary Club of Sydney Darling Harbour – October 9
- Rotary Club of Sydney – October 22
- Rotary Club of Caringbah – September 28
- Rotary Club of Menai – November 18
- Rotary Club of Camden – November 28
- Rotary Club of Sydney Christmas Luncheon – December 17 (performed)

Rotaraction

For more hands-on volunteer work, I joined the Sydney City Rotaract Club. This ever-growing group of benevolent twenty-somethings became not only a means of community involvement for me, but also my greatest source of friendship. This is easily conceivable, as we maintained a strict balance of social events with our vocational, community and international projects, and in the footsteps of many Rotary Club meetings, each of our Rotaract meetings was capped over a pint at the pub next door.

Though I wasn't inducted until July, I became active with Rotaract straight away. On May 4, I organized a dinner meeting for the Sydney City Rotaractors and the Sydney Ambassadorial Scholars, at which I hoped that other scholars would seize the opportunity to join our group. I traveled to Sydney's Blue Mountains (imagine a Grand Canyon filled with blue gum trees) to attend the Rotaract District Training Weekend, from August 30-September 1. For the Rotaract meeting that coincided with the anniversary of September 11, I was commissioned to write a preface to the moment of silence, and on December 11, I presented the regular "Expert Tease" segment, giving a brief discussion on flute performance, and yes, pulling out my flute for a few notes.

Our primary community project last year was Stepping Stone House – the site of an intervention program that helps bring teenagers in from off the street and gear them toward a more responsible, self-sustaining adulthood. During an organized working bee on June 15, we painted, cleaned and helped renovate the house in order to give the kids a nicer home. By the end of the year, we also were providing tutorial and mentoring services.

On July 28, our team planted trees in Sydney Park for "National Plant a Tree Day", underscoring the willing environmental responsibility and pro-activism that are characteristic of the Australian national mindset. Then on October 28, Sydney Rotaractors sold more than \$4000 worth of pink ribbons in support of breast cancer research as part of the city's "Bras Across the Bridge" campaign. I will never forget the sight of 900 empty braziers, pinned to a clothesline and swinging in the breeze along Sydney's Pyrmont Bridge.

Sydney Rotaractors also were kept busy last year raising funds for relief efforts to support the victim's of Australia's natural disasters.

My year in Sydney unfortunately coincided with Australia's worst drought in memorable history. Though incomparably beautiful, my long-lasting images of the New South Wales countryside will be of sunburned and thirsty farmlands, dehydrated animals and desperate farmers. Though the city was never put on water supply rations, many of my friends' hometowns were, and I quickly learned the value of conservation.

As you have probably read in the news, Australia also suffers greatly every year from disastrous bush fires. Inexplicably, many of these fires begin at the hands of arsonists, but many still are simply the consequence of Australia's inhospitable conditions – dry bush land and extremely hot summer temperatures. The fires began early last year, as early as October, and raged through many of Sydney's nearby suburbs. Most recently, more than 400 homes were destroyed in Canberra. Though part of the natural vegetation re-growth process, and necessary to the survival of many of Australia's plant species, these fires are devastating, and I might never shake the experience of catching ash in my hand as it fell from the sky like snow.

Though we never participated in them, we did stumble upon an unconventional community service effort to aid Australia's large farming population – Bunny Bashing Sessions. Australia's land is incredibly uninviting. Of its 18 million people, 95% or more live along a sliver of fertile soil along the eastern and part of the western coasts of the country. In between those two slivers is some of the driest desert land on

earth. Also because of its challenging seasonal weather, Australia was never meant to be farm country. Consequently, the cows and other hoofed animals are not naturally there; the European settlers introduced them to Australia. Additionally, foxes, dogs, cats and bunnies were never meant to meet the native kangaroos, wombats and koalas. They have infected the food chain and are actually causing the extinction of many native species, not to mention nibbling on farmers' crops. The animal lover that I am, it took a great deal of firsthand experience on my part to understand many Australians' dislike and extermination of what I may have considered domestic pets.

Giving Back to Basser

As I previously mentioned, by becoming a duty tutor at Basser College I was able to serve a very specialized community within the greater Sydney community. In this role, I acted as an academic adviser to residents within the arts/humanities realm and as a mentor to any resident having difficulty adjusting to the new college environment. Unlike American dormitories, UNSW's colleges are primarily student run. Therefore, I provided a valuable link between the student voice and that of the administration.

I was also there to engage with the students and encourage an environment of fun with learning. For the resident-organized talent show, "Basser Under the Stars", I introduced Basserians to my musical side, and on July 4, with the help of several friends, I organized a traditional American-style barbecue as a cultural event, complete with hot dogs, hamburgers and potato salad.

In addition to regular support of the college and its residents, I led a Point of Contact committee, which was a confidential resource for residents who felt they had been harassed or discriminated against. It was also a proactive scheme, which worked to support a tolerant living environment by providing educational awareness events throughout the year. As P.O.C. Coordinator for Basser, I conducted a survey to update information gathered in 1998 on the incidence of harassment, discrimination and other antisocial scenarios within the college. Based on this data, I was justified in organizing a guest speaker to come to our college and address these all-important issues in a casual and informative manner.

To address the written communication difficulties I discussed earlier, I also worked directly with my partner student Resident Advisor to organize library tours and essay-writing workshops in collaboration with the university's learning center.

If Only I Could Have Done More

By far my most rewarding community service experience last year involved my time spent at a place called Linga Longa. I was first introduced to the project and its owner, Rotarian Jack Beetson, at the District 9750 Conference earlier in the year. Part Aboriginal himself, Jack has devoted his time and his farmland to promoting the education of non-indigenous Australians about the philosophy and culture of Australia's original inhabitants, the Aborigines.

Up until the 1970s, as a residual part of colonial England's "civilizing mission", an effort existed to remove Aboriginal children from their families and place them in missions to be raised Christian and then bred with European Australians. At the lowest, most hands-on level, those who carried out this incredible deed sincerely believed they were doing something to help the Aborigines. What resulted, however, and what was the unofficial and undocumented goal, was the eradication of Australia's original race and a culture that extended back more than 40,000 years.

Aborigines now comprise only 2% percent of Australia's population, and not one can claim a 100% Aboriginal background. What has become known as a "Stolen Generation" remains of culturally displaced indigenous people. With no social structure and little support, many of these people suffer from

unemployment, malnutrition and drug abuse. A historic and fascinating discourse is currently alive between the indigenous population and Australia's government, and while I was happy to have been involved in Jack's effort at all, I only wish I could have done more.

Jack's mission is to work for these people, his people. Every year, hundreds of Australians and visitors from other countries camp out on his farmland and participate in his Aboriginal Philosophy Week. On a more frequent basis, his home also becomes home to handfuls of orphaned and otherwise disadvantaged Aboriginal youths. Through their involvement and learned relationship with the land, Jack says these kids undergo a near 180-degree change of outlook, perspective and self-esteem.

I was truly inspired by Jack Beetson, and almost immediately after hearing him speak at the conference, I leaned over to my host, Robert, and whispered, "How do I help?" The answer came to me twice – the first time in an e-mail from Rotarian John McBeath of the Rotary Club of Sydney CBD. They had organized a working bee from August 2-4 and were looking for all the help they could get. Unfortunately, all the help they could get was little more than li'l old me. Nonetheless, I hopped on the next train north and met John for three days of hard work renovating an old barn into an office.

My second calling came in a Rotaract newsletter. I anxiously responded and was allowed to join the Rotaract Club of Como-Jannali in their working bee weekend, from September 20-22. Under the friendly direction of Rotarian Graeme Boler of the Rotary Club of Sutherland, our team completed the first of several planned bunkhouses.

Jack Beetson's farm is set on some of the most breathtaking Australian countryside I had the pleasure of seeing, but even more humbling than the landscape was the tour Jack gave me of the new site. Where once was just a grassy hill on which people camp, now stands a solidly constructed bunkhouse and plans for several more just like it. By the barn is no longer just the stray cow, but a handicap-accessible bathhouse and a fully functional kitchen. All of this is there because of Rotary.

In six days over two working bee weekends, I broke every nail I had, got sawdust all over my face, dirt in my hair and paint in my eye. I sawed, I hammered...I met the largest and hairiest Australian spider I ever care to imagine (and must I point out that Australia is home to some eight of ten of the world's deadliest creatures?). I plastered walls with the cameraman from Ozzy Osbourne's tour group. I took an ice cold shower beneath the Southern Cross – a constellation only visible from the Southern Hemisphere – woke up and started work every day at the sound of the rooster and drank coffee as the sun rose over an inspiring Australian horizon. At the end of the day, I stood back in complete satisfaction and admiration of something that wasn't even there at the start. Quite honestly, I think I might have gotten more out of those working bee weekends than did the camp or the cause.

Australians: They're bloody brilliant.

One of the jarring aspects of the Ambassadorial Scholarship is that it turns you into somewhat of a Cinderella. At the wave of Rotary's magical "youth service" wand, I spun around in a cloud of fairy dust and was transformed into an alternate version of me. We all seem to spend a great deal of time imagining ways to better ourselves and then deciding that tomorrow is most certainly the day that such lifestyle changes will occur. Unexpectedly, many of the lifestyle changes I had ever prescribed for myself, I actually found inherent in the Australian culture, at least that of which I was introduced to.

Don't get me wrong; the Australian culture is certainly not flawless. Paramount in my mind is the irony I confronted each time a finger was pointed in my direction, followed by the term "racist". I still have not come to understand how Americans are easily racist given the turbulent relationship between white and

black peoples, but Australians somehow are not, despite the turbulent relationship between European and Aboriginal peoples. They have somehow elected a man that no one supports. They have detention centers full of starving refugees. Furthermore, though Australians are known for their athleticism and overall fitness, the convenience of fast food is taking its toll, and I recall at least two articles in the Sydney Morning Herald addressing the population's increasing obesity rates.

However, last year I ate fresh vegetables and not one frozen dinner. I played equally as much as I worked. I exercised. I didn't watch a lick of television, but I read dozens of books. I drank good coffee, really good coffee. I went outside, even when I didn't have anything to do out there. I stopped and smelled every rose. I became gregarious – a simple side effect of Australians' infectious cheer and friendliness. I learned how to properly use my knife and fork, thanks to a very "encouraging" Rotarian – Continental-style eating, I believe it is called. I stayed away from the staple meat pies and sausage rolls, but I did sumptuously enjoy delicacies of the Asian- and European-influenced modern Australian cuisine. While the barbecue was firing up for steaks, sausages and pumpkin, I didn't run off to finish errands, I chatted with my hosts about John Howard's government, the situation of Australia's refugee camps or the beautiful sunset we had the night before.

I enjoyed the white-hot spotlight of Australians' attention, their genuine interest in people and their ability to actively engage in conversation, complete with direct eye-contact and a startlingly smaller customary speaking distance.

I traveled to four of Australia's seven other major cities – Canberra, Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide – as well as several of its smaller country towns – Orange, Wauchope and Gunnedah. I was given a personal tour of the nation's High Court. I drove my host family's '82 Toyota Corolla up the Pacific Highway to Nelson Bay for dolphin- and whale-watching adventures with my visiting parents and friends, and to the famous Hunter Valley to taste the Shiraz for which it's known. Over the semester break, I took two of my best mates up the Queensland coast, from Surfers Paradise to Noosa, escaped for a weekend on the nearly untouched Great Keppel Island and sailed around the myriad Whitsunday Islands. In just ten days, I survived a robbing and a National Lampoon road trip around New Zealand's South Island.

I suppose that at some point, the clock had to strike midnight and my carriage return to its previous pumpkin form. What I have been most fearful of upon "re-entry" into America, though, is that I might lose all that I had achieved. What I have since realized is that I am indeed still refining.

My Life Bisected: Before Australia, After Australia.

That a single year overseas could be life altering sounds so clichéd to this English Studies major, I nearly cringe. If only it weren't so true. My experience as a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar was an awakening, an epiphany of sorts. It was a cultural and political revolution, a personal exploration, a Renaissance. Tunnel vision destroyed. Cultural insulation identified. International and political interests piqued. And from now on, I can only describe the events of my life as either before Australia, or after.

In my speeches to Rotary Clubs in District 9750, I compared my experience as an Ambassadorial Scholar to a story about my four-year-old cousin who had just received her first pair of glasses. We never noticed that her vision had been blurred all along. Then with amazement, my family watched her put on these glasses and see the same old world, completely brand new. She excitedly pointed out new colors in portraits she had gazed at many times before. She took new notice of the textures and patterns on dresses she had worn many times before. I dare rely on another cliché, but Rotary handed me a new pair of glasses last year, a new way of viewing the world, and for the first time in my life, I can see clearly.

What a phenomenally interesting way to learn about oneself. Mix one American in a “melting pot” of 18 million seemingly similar but very essentially different Australians from varying Asian, New Zealand, Polynesian, Indonesian and European backgrounds (and 20 million kangaroos, just to spice things up). Bring to boil, then let simmer for eleven months.

At first, I stood out like the only carrot in this vegetable soup. Whether because of how I dressed, or which side of the walkway I meandered down, or how hesitant I was to let friendly Australian blokes buy my drinks (because American girls have chips on their shoulders, don’t you know), or for goodness sakes, how comparatively nasal and unrefined my American accent was – I was a dead giveaway. All I could concentrate on was how different I was from everyone around me, and I was utterly paranoid about it.

Of course by the end of the year, I had become well blended within the rest of the soup. I picked up the brilliant lingo – “heaps”, “reckon”, “bloody” – and a rare few thought they noticed an Australian accent on my breath. I wore hipster jeans and sandals in the middle of winter. I foiled my hair and taked Parliament politics with the hairdresser. I gave lost strangers directions to Chinatown. Finally, one glorious afternoon on a bench in Hyde Park, I watched tourists take photos of the fountain and realized that no one could tell me apart from a local Sydneysider.

Over the course of eleven months, a transformation took place, and it involved much more than jeans and accents. As I mentioned in my two-month report, my character also was unwittingly recreated upon my arrival in Sydney. No longer was I Jen Shatwell from Lake Charles, Louisiana, as I had been for much of my life. Suddenly, I was American Jen Shatwell – American before anything else, whether I wanted to be or not. When I wasn’t looking, the context in which I had defined myself was magnified.

On the surface, Australia looks a lot like America. I only needed to walk one block in any direction to find a McDonald’s or Subway, though I did have to take a bus to get to Starbucks. It was like looking in a cultural mirror. Then unexpectedly, about two months into my year, the deeper and essential cultural differences became more apparent to me. The mirror was turned around, and I was forced to take a closer look at myself and my cultural personality.

I was challenged – by professors, classmates, Rotarians, even taxi cab drivers – to defend if not simply offer a perspective on the actions of my president and the majority of 300 million people that seem to support him unquestionably. I engaged in conversations about the reality of America’s separation of church and state, and that was during the court hearings on whether to remove “under God” from our Pledge of Allegiance. I was questioned by students, five years my junior, on why young adults in America are not more widely encouraged to travel. I was tested on my knowledge of other countries, and asked to explain why Americans seem to know so much about individual state histories and our own country’s history, but comparatively, so little about the rest of the world. I was the recipient of misdirected anger in reaction to cultural imperialism – the fast food chains, the Hollywood productions – and I tried desperately to evaluate and debunk the commonly held and sometimes justified stereotypes of Americans.

I learned as much about America living in Sydney last year as I did about Australia.

At first, I did what I thought a good ambassador should do – a lot of listening. Then I asked a lot of questions. There is no doubt; America is currently the world’s dominant power. Because of this status, our actions, beliefs and ways of life will continue to be critically examined and scrutinized. In a unique and paradoxical love/hate relationship, our culture and society are simultaneously emulated and rejected, not only by Australians, but by people of many nations around the world. While unfair or unfortunate, the stereotypes that have been made and tagged to our nationality have been so based on exposure to American travelers, American media and American foreign policy.

Indeed, the most common criticism of the United States that I came across is that, on average, we seem to be dangerously insular.

Either just out of high school or as part of their university study, Australian young adults are strongly encouraged to travel and study other cultures. Many study abroad, participate in overseas internships or become active in community service projects. Others simply purchase around-the-world tickets and travel for the sake of travel. Australians joke that this mindset came about because Australia is so far removed from the rest of the continental world, and because they must prove to their children that a “rest of the world” does exist.

All humor aside, I consider this a healthy and admirable mindset, which produces some surprisingly worldly and educated young Australian adults. The same is instilled in the youth of Britain, South Africa, Canada and many other Western countries; similarly young adults from India, China, Singapore and other parts of Asia are sent abroad to study and obtain degrees.

Where are all of the American representatives abroad?

In the wake of September 11 and the attacks on Bali, this topic of cultural insulation was even more significant. What a critical time in history it was for me to be breaking down boundaries and exploring cultural differences. I wasn't alive for Pearl Harbour or Hiroshima, I have very little understanding of the atrocities in Cambodia or Rwanda, I didn't see Neil and Buzz land on the moon and I was even too young to fully understand the implications of the Gulf War. I have grown up in an era with little worry, with little understanding of world affairs and with a scrolling CNN stock ticker between me and anything that is real. All of that has now changed.

Last year, my American patriotism was questioned and shaken. It was difficult not to be defensive at first, as I was labeled racist, rich, uncultured and arrogant. In silent defense, I ruthlessly read newspapers and varying international accounts of contemporary politics. I read the works of Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, which offered a starkly contrasting image of “peace-keeping missions” than CNN or FOX. As I learned more, and began forming my own assenting and dissenting opinions, my loyalty swayed. Because I could not justify all of my country's actions, or make much difference in what was coming out of Washington D.C., I wanted to hide from my own nationality. On the upswing of this roller coaster, however, I could more clearly see the good and the bad within my home society. I could sensibly champion our admired freedoms and luxuries, while also recognizing my opportunities to be an ambassador and promote change.

As you might imagine, the culture shock on this end of the Ambassadorial Scholarship experience is far worse. Having had the opportunity to step outside my cultural self, to see myself as others do and form my own opinions or judgements, it is now extremely challenging to simply slip back into society as if nothing has changed. I can quite easily enjoy the benefits of being American, now that I have an alternative with which to compare, but I cannot ignore those characteristics of Americanism that I feel could be different. Trying to reconcile my enthusiasm to promote change with the reality that such progress takes time is overwhelming, and sometimes discouraging, but it has provided a new direction in my life.

As predicted, I am a stronger American now than I ever have been, or than I ever imagined I would be, and indeed a more responsible member of the global community. In this position of great power and influence, I feel it is my absolute responsibility as an American to become aware of the implications of my country's enormity, to maintain modesty and multilateral approaches to international affairs, to support but question my government and the decisions being made on my behalf which so profoundly

affect people around the world, and finally, to reach out and try better understanding other people's situations, perspectives, histories and cultures.

I am proud to be an exception to the stereotypes. An American with an insatiable cultural curiosity and hunger to travel. One that is critical and values international and opposing perspectives. One that reads international newspapers. An American to whom backpackers and travelers will enjoy talking. One that drinks good coffee and knows it. One that offers "service above self" across any and all boundaries – be they cultural, national, religious or otherwise. An American that is educated, loud and active. An American that votes, questions, writes letters and speaks out.

I will never be the same.

What I Left Behind. What is Left for Me to Do.

How do I consider my lasting impact as a Rotary Scholar on the Rotarians of District 9750, the Rotaractors of Sydney City, the residents of Bassett College, my host family, my UNSW classmates and the general population of Sydney, Australia, with which I formed friendships?

It is dwarfed by the lasting impact they all have had on me.

I suppose I might be remembered as the American scholar that tossed the simple hometown anecdotes and seriously addressed Americanism – the firsthand account of an average American young adult who had until now never set foot or eyes beyond U.S. borders.

Otherwise, I may surely be remembered for my etouffee or at least the role I played in fostering the addiction of unwitting Australians to Tony Chachere seasonings.

I now proudly wear the title of past Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar, and as an alum, I will roll back my sleeves and dirty my hands in service to my local and international communities. I will become an inducted member of Rotaract, and hopefully, a registered Rotary Volunteer. I will continue to distinguish between simply being a scholarship recipient and actively being an ambassador of culture and service.

So far in my two months home, I have visited four District 6200 Rotary Clubs:

Rotary Club of Lake Charles (my sponsor) – February 4
Rotary Club of Opelousas Sunrise – February 6
Rotary Club of Lafayette North – February 11
Rotary Club of Sulphur – February 19

Additionally, I was invited to share my experiences with the United Way of Southwest Louisiana's Youth Advisory Council – an impressively proactive group of local high school students.

Though at first I was nervous to breach the standard anecdotal presentation as I had in Australia, for fear that it might be misconstrued as anti-American or accusatory, my youthful perspective and message has consistently been well received by Louisiana Rotarians. In fact, I have been invited to speak at the District 6200 Conference in Lafayette, from April 24-26, for an audience of more than 600.

I fully believe that the benefits of international travel and exchange are unmatched and limitless, and that through the sheer encouragement of America's youth to travel, to explore and to question, we can

contribute to the establishment of world peace and understanding – the aims of this scholarship program. Therefore, I will continue to champion The Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholarship program, and every day, I will strive to sustain the return on Rotary's investment in me and as best I can, positively shape the future of American leaders.

Those I Could Always Count On

Whew. Before I wrap up my novel here, please let me extend just a few words of thanks in proper Julia Roberts Academy Award fashion:

- 1.) To Rotarian Joe Miller of the Rotary Club of Lake Charles – for remembering and finding me, for the application and for encouragement.
- 2.) To Rotarian Donna Landry of the Rotary Club of Lafayette North – for being the individual on this side of the planet I knew I could rely on for help, for being a voice of optimism and support upon my return.
- 3.) To Rotarian Robert Mitchell of the Rotary Club of Sydney and his family – in a nutshell, for going the extra mile, for welcoming me into your lives and for helping make Sydney my home.
- 4.) To my parents – for supporting me, for visiting me and for encouraging me to take every opportunity.
- 5.) To The Rotary Foundation – for my new pair of glasses, you have shown me the world.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Shatwell
2002 Ambassadorial Scholar
Sponsored by the Rotary Club of Lake Charles, District 6200
Hosted by the Rotary Club of Sydney, Inc., District 9750
Graduate – University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia