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Fayette residents in group-study exchange

By Christine Haines, Herald-Standard
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Three Fayette County residents are on their way to Sweden as part of a five-person Rotary group-study exchange.

Andrew French of Brownsville, Maria Fetock of Grindstone and Louis Orslene of Filbert leave today for their five-week stay in southern Sweden. Their team leader is Lawna Blankenship of Peters Township, who is the vice president for resource development for the United Way of Washington County and is in her second term as president of the Canonsburg-Houston Rotary Club. The fifth member of the team is Mary Auen, a clinical psychologist from Blairsville.

French, assistant director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, said he considered a similar Rotary trip to India last year but couldn't arrange the time off due to his work schedule and classes he was taking at the University of Pittsburgh.

"(Rotarian) Scott Campbell had mentioned it to me," French said. "He said it was a once-in-a-lifetime event. It's a life-changing event and it will never be convenient."

French said he made up his mind to apply for this year's trip. He was interviewed in September and selected for the team.

"When we go to Sweden, we'll have to present a program at various Rotary clubs, so we've been working on that," French said.

Each member of the group will spend one day a week with someone in their profession in Sweden. French said he is looking forward to meeting with the chief planner for the city of

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Lund.

"I've never traveled outside the U.S., except for Canada. It will bring an intercultural perspective to my vocation," French said.

Louis Orslene is assistant director of services for the International Center for Disability Information at West Virginia University. The trip intrigues him professionally.

"The Scandinavian countries are where the model for decentralized social services comes from that we use in the United States. I wanted to see it first-hand. I had read a lot about it in college," Orslene said.

He said he is particularly interested in seeing how the deinstitutional movement has progressed in Sweden.

He's also looking forward to the personal intercultural experience with the five families with whom he will be staying. His host family in Lund already has been in contact with him.

"They e-mailed me that they have my bicycle ready. Even though it's a city of 90,000, they really don't have any roads or cars, just paths," Orslene said.

He said preparing for a five-week trip is daunting.

"That does present a lot of challenges and the people around you have to be very giving," Orslene said.

Maria Fetock, who teaches at Geibel Catholic High School, said her principal was very supportive when she approached him with the possibility of going to Sweden.

"I saw the article in the Herald-Standard in August or September of last year. I'm the moderator of Interact here (at Geibel) and I thought of applying to share with the students here. I wanted to encourage them to apply for the student opportunities that are available through Rotary," Fetock said.

Interact is the Rotary Club's high school affiliate program.

Fetock said she is required to make presentations to area Rotary clubs when she returns from her trip, but she has even more presentations planned for herself.

"I hope to share it with my fellow faculty and the students here," Fetock said.

She said she is excited about experiencing a different culture.

"We'll be staying with five different host families. It's an immersion different from what you would get during a vacation," Fetock said.

The daily schedule will have the team participants on the go from 9 a.m. into the evening most days. The first week will be spent in Malmo, Sweden's third largest city with a population of 270,000. A railway/motor vehicle bridge to Copenhagen creates a metropolitan area of 3.5 million people, making it one of the 10 largest metropolitan areas in Europe.

The second week will be spent in Lund, a city founded in 990. It is the home of the Lund Cathedral, consecrated in 1145, and the University of Lund, founded in 1668. The university has 40,000 students, many from foreign countries.

The contingent will spend the third, fourth and fifth weeks of the trip in Skane. The third week is in southeastern Skane in the small medieval city of Ystad. The fourth week will be spent in the northwestern part of Skane in the areas of Helsingborg and Hoganas, an area ranging from farmland to forests with a hilly terrain. The area also contains Sweden's highest mountain, Kullaberg. The area is also known for its ceramics and was a strong coal mining area.

The final week will be in the central western part of Skane, in the municipal district of Lomma. The area is known for its leisure activities, including tennis, horseback riding, swimming, sailing and windsurfing.

The team will visit an automotive equipment manufacturer, the rescue school at Revingehed, a military installation and the Agricultural University of Alnarp. Although an afternoon of shopping has been scheduled, windsurfing and horseback riding are not on the agenda.

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