

International friendship warms community's heart during Rotary conference

The Sentinel
Febr 18/03.

It may have been bitterly cold weather, but the warmth of friendship shared by 95 students from 25 different countries warmed the hearts of people along the North Shore last weekend during the Rotary Club's mid-winter youth exchange conference.

For four days, the students soaked up the hospitality extended to them by local families, toured area attractions and met their peers at area high schools. However, they also left behind the gift of friendship, along with a large helping of their own culture.



Blind River Rotary Club president Chris Laberge was pleased to welcome Frederico Braga of Brazil, Matko Maravic of Croatia and Helene Bentsen of Denmark to the community for Rotary's mid-winter youth exchange conference last weekend. The teenagers were among a group of 95 students from 25 countries who took in Canada's winter heritage.

"It's been cold outside, but we're still having a lot of fun," stated Matko Maravic, a Rotary exchange student spending the year in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "We're learning about traditional Canadian winter activities like ice fishing, snow shoeing, snowmobiling and hockey, and we all enjoy hanging out together."

The high-spirited teenagers had a jam-packed weekend, beginning on Thursday evening when they were greeted by local dignitaries. The outbound students (those preparing to leave on exchange visits this coming August) also learned where they will be spending their year abroad.

Local student Laura Mayer will be headed to Germany for her exchange visit, and was swept away by the enthusiasm of her fellow conference attendees. She exclaimed, "Everyone is so nice and so full of energy, you can't help but get excited about the year coming up."

Inbound students (those from far-away lands spending the year in Ontario and Michigan) spent Friday morning sharing their culture with local elementary school students. Others toured the Mississauga First Nation, and came away with a great appreciation for the way Native Canadians and people of other ancestries can live so close together in a har-

monious relationship.

"It was really cool visiting the reserve," Frederico Braga of Brazil confirmed. "It's great how two very different cultures can mix together so well. Nobody seems to care that they have different backgrounds. It's just like the people at our conference."

Frederico, who is spending the year in Sault Ste. Marie as a student at Sir James Dunn Secondary School, is thoroughly enjoying the experience despite temperatures he was totally unprepared to battle. "It's really cold, but the people are very nice to me," he stated. "I've made a lot of friends since coming here in August."

After a community lunch on Saturday, the students headed off to play snow soccer or take part in all sorts of outdoor activities at The Lodge on Lake Matinenda. They finished their weekend by taking in a Junior "A" hockey game featuring the Blind River Beavers on Saturday evening, then skating with the local hockey heroes after the game.

"We had an awesome time all weekend," confirmed Danish student Helene Bentsen, who is spending her exchange visit in Ludington, Michigan. "The people treated us like royalty. Thumbs up to Blind River and all the people of the North Shore!"