

## 2025 ASSE/WH Grants Scholarship Conference: Celebrating Impact, Inspiring Action

By Grants Program Team Members

Each year, the ASSE/World Heritage Grants Scholarship Conference brings together our Area Representatives, Area Coordinators, scholarship students, and partners for an energizing weekend of training, inspiration, and connection. The 2025 conference took place in beautiful San Diego, California.

More than just a professional development event, the conference is a celebration of our shared mission. Months in the making, it unites returning and new team members with representatives from American Councils, the U.S. Department of State, and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA).

The heart of the event is always the students. Selected through rigorous competition, FLEX and YES students share their powerful stories of personal growth, cultural exchange, and the life-changing impact of their experience.

Field staff gain insights from peers and learn firsthand how these students enrich their host communities. ECA and American Councils representatives provide valuable program context, tips, and space for open dialogue. Feedback consistently ranks this as a favorite conference—thanks to the inspiring voices of our students.

A highlight of the event is the participation of our outstanding scholarship students. Nominated by their Area Representatives and Area Coordinators, and selected by the Grants Program team, these students reflect the very best of our program. This year, we were honored to welcome these eight exceptional young people as youth ambassadors:



- **Zhamila Omorova, Kyrgyzstan** – An active volunteer with more than 100 service hours, known for her cultural presentations and community spirit.

- **Dusan Stojanovic, Serbia** – Proud of his heritage, with 80+ hours of volunteer work, known for his outgoing personality and infectious enthusiasm.

- **Ana Makatsaria, Georgia** – Resilient and committed, even after displacement due to natural disaster.

- **Temur Nurimov, Uzbekistan** – A peer leader who has embraced sports, taught coding, and shared his culture with openness and drive.

- **Iskra Georgievska, Macedonia** – Deeply involved in the arts, teaching dance, and participating in cultural presentations.

- **Bagila Yessirkepova, Kazakhstan** – Always positive and proactive, who helped recruit a host family during her very first week.

- **Mihai Todoroscean, Moldova** – A standout scholar and volunteer who proudly promotes his culture while leading community projects.

- **Oleksandr Hladkyi, Ukraine** – A dedicated volunteer and a lover of literature and Ukrainian poetry.

Together, with the support of our team and partners, we continue to empower young leaders and build bridges between nations. Let's keep the momentum going—connecting hearts, and cultures across the globe.

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## Bowls of Hope: Samuel's Sweet Success Story

How do you give back to a community that takes you in with open arms? That's the question Hungarian FLEX Scholarship exchange student Samuel Szalma asked himself during his year in Canton Township, Michigan. His answer? Cereal. Lots and lots of cereal.

Samuel, who recently graduated from Plymouth High School in Canton, is an enthusiastic local volunteer. Last spring, he decided to organize a cereal drive for one of his favorite places to give back: Hope Clinic in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Known for providing food and medical care to those in need, the clinic was often short on one much-loved pantry item—boxed cereal.

And so, the Bowls of Hope Cereal Drive was born. Samuel set up collection baskets at the Canton Township Office, the Canton Public Library, and Summit on the Park. He hoped to collect 200 boxes of cereal. Thanks to the generosity of the Canton community, he didn't just meet that goal—he beat it! A total of 201 boxes were donated, each one a small act of kindness with a big impact.

Samuel credits his host mom, Brenda Vaishnav, with helping him develop the idea and chauffeuring him from donation point to donation point. He was also grateful to everyone who helped make the drive a success—from those who offered advice and logistical support to those who provided space for donation bins and helped manage the collections. Most of all, he thanks the people of Canton for showing up with open hearts and full carts.

And of course, a heartfelt thanks goes to Hope Clinic—for not only providing essential services to those in need, but also giving volunteers like our Flex Scholarship exchange student Samuel a place to belong. Turns out, a little cereal can go a long way...



### Editor's Box

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who has contributed articles and photos to ASSE News! Your submissions make this newsletter possible. We'd love to hear from you—whether you're a student, host family, or Area Representative. Share your experiences, and you might be featured in an upcoming issue or on our ASSE/World Heritage social media channels. Don't have the time or desire to write an article but still want to share something exciting? No problem! Just email or call us with your news, and we'll take it from there. Photos are encouraged to be sent by email to [sgreer@asse.com](mailto:sgreer@asse.com).

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Looking forward to hearing from you!  
Until next edition, Sonia Greer, ASSE/World Heritage News Editor

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## Host Family Spotlight: The International House of Locke and Love

James and Audra Locke know better than most how hosting an exchange student can change your life. Over the years, they've opened their home—and their hearts—to 16 students from 15 different countries. Each young person left a lasting imprint, becoming part of a growing global family.

Audra's journey with ASSE has mirrored that same spirit of connection. What began as the role of host mom evolved into Area Representative, and now, Area Coordinator for Texas in ASSE's Western Region—roles through which she has supported countless students and local Area Representatives with dedication and heart.

This spring, the Lockes took their commitment one step further. When the opportunity arose to surprise their former exchange student Ricards Berzins in Latvia for his birthday, they didn't hesitate. Packing their bags—and a smoked Texas brisket—they embarked on a 20-hour journey across the globe.

Arriving in Latvia, they went straight to Ricards' home. The look of surprise and joy on his face was a moment they'll always treasure. The week that followed was filled with unforgettable experiences: exploring the vibrant cobblestone streets of Old Town Riga, venturing underground into a Soviet-era nuclear bunker, flying down an Olympic-grade bobsled track, and sampling local delicacies in markets housed inside WWI Zeppelin hangars. They even managed to share a taste of Texas in Riga's Tex-Mex scene.



Yet, it was the simple, quiet moments that meant the most—gathered around the table with Ricards and his family, sharing meals, laughter, and stories. These were the moments that truly reflected the lifelong impact of cultural exchange.

Hosting is about more than introducing someone to American life—it's about building bridges across oceans and generations. James and Audra's trip to Latvia was a beautiful reminder that when you open your home with love, you also open your life to enduring friendships and adventures.

James and Audra recently said goodbye to their two 2024-25 students—Luka from Georgia and Yi Wen "Brian" from Taiwan, but they're already looking forward to welcoming their next student, Maja from Poland, this August.

Thank you, Locke family, for the love and generosity you've shown to so many students. And a special thank you to Audra, for her continued leadership and support as our ASSE Texas Area Coordinator.



## Three Minutes of Video Magic: Exchange Stories That Stole Our Hearts

By Sam Jeziorski, ASSE/World Heritage Digital Marketing Manager

Earlier this Spring, we launched a video contest inviting our international students to share their exchange experience in a 3-minute video, and what we received was nothing short of inspiring. Over 15 students participated, each one taking the time to reflect on their journey, express their gratitude, and highlight what this experience has meant to them. From moments of culture shock to deep friendships, family dinners to school events, each video gave us a window into the personal and transformative impact of the exchange experience. It was a reminder—for all of us involved—of why we do what we do.

After much deliberation (and a lot of smiles!), we selected three winners whose stories particularly stood out. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did!



**1st Place: Azalea** (Indonesia – Huntsville, Texas)

Azalea's video beautifully highlighted the cultural shock she experienced and how she adapted thanks to the support of her host family and local community. Watch it here on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) and give it a thumbs up.



**2nd Place: Gunel** (Azerbaijan – Caledonia, Wisconsin)

Gunel shared an authentic, heart-to-heart conversation with her host family, offering a touching and sincere look into their bond. Watch it here on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) and give it a thumbs up.



**3rd Place: Jeanne** (France – Riverview, Florida)

Jeanne's video felt like a personal scrapbook, reflecting with simplicity and warmth on her time in the U.S. Watch it here on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) and give it a thumbs up.

Each of them shared their experiences with authenticity and heart. Gunel, our second-place winner, sent us a note afterward saying: "Endless thanks for the kind gesture! It means so much to me! I also hope that our video helped encourage and inspire others! I am always trying to encourage people around me—friends, teachers—for hosting. I think it would be an amazing experience for them." We couldn't agree more.

To all our supporters, Area Representatives, and host families: THANK YOU. These videos are a testament to the incredible difference you make in the lives of students from around the world.

## Emma from Italy: ASSE Student in the News

We're proud to see one of our outstanding exchange students featured in the Southern Maryland News, May 6, 2025 e-edition. Emma Agazzani, from Mantua, Italy, who just completed her exchange year in Huntingtown, Maryland, was hosted by the Higginbotham family and supported by Area Representative Kathleen McCord in the ASSE East Region. Read more about Emma's exciting American experience in the adapted excerpts from the Southern Maryland News article below.

Unlike her hometown of Mantua — known as Italy's "Capital of Culture" — Huntingtown has no opera house or Renaissance art galleries, but Emma embraced the

contrast. "It was something I wanted to do since I was very young," she told the newspaper, citing "the language, the culture, the travel" as motivations for applying to ASSE back in February 2022. At 17, she has just completed her senior year at Huntingtown High School, where she immersed herself in quintessentially American experiences like cheerleading—something she described as "a dream" and nearly nonexistent in Europe—and lacrosse, a sport entirely new to her.

Emma's academic schedule included AP English, AP Government, pre-calculus, biology, photography, and theater. Now that she is back in Italy, she plans to complete her final year of high school before heading to university, where she plans to study science and ultimately become a neurologist.

Outside the classroom, the Higginbotham family introduced her to many highlights of American culture and geography—from a Christmas parade at Disney World to swimming with dolphins, from sightseeing in New York and Atlanta to tasting her first Philly cheesesteak. In Washington, D.C., she even attended the Easter Egg Roll at the White House.

Comparing life in Calvert County to her walkable, compact hometown, Emma observed, "Here, everything is spread out and very big." Still, she loved her time in the U.S., summing it up by saying, "I really like the school and this town." For her host mom Danielle Higginbotham, the experience was equally meaningful: "She's my daughter now. We've created a friendship, a bond."

